Between Buzzwords and Bodies: Investigating the Ambiguities of Allyship with Judith Butler's Relational Thinking

by
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Declaration

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to investigate and deepen the concept of "allyship" from a relational lens. By asking how feminist philosopher Judith Butler's relational thinking might offer a more nuanced account of allyship, I suggest that there are certain limitations within the current academic and social discourse surrounding allyship, particularly concerning acts of public assembly in the form of protest action. These limitations are identified based on the "surplus in meaning" that stems from ambiguous acts of allyship on an ontological, ethical and political level, as informed by both my personal experience during protest action and the specific case study of the "human shield" as a perceived act of allyship. Every focal point of this thesis, therefore, seeks to sketch how Butler's relational thinking can offer a helpful lexicon to engage fruitfully with the ambiguities of allyship.

In Chapter Two, I set out to explain what constitutes Butler's relational thinking. By providing a broader overview of her theoretical oeuvre, I frame Butler's relational thinking as an intertwined account of ontology, ethics, and politics. I then continue to discuss each of these three aspects respectively. In doing so, I point out that Butler's relational ontology offers an alternative ontology against sovereign subjectivity; a distinct account of the Butlerian subject (as always in process, discursive, performative, and opaque); and a social ontology that is embodied. I also show how Butler's relational ethics advocates for "the liveable life" that seeks to reduce precarity by focusing on our shared sense of precariousness and responsibility for the other. Lastly, I claim that Butler's constructivist account of political agency translates into a politics of subversion that can offer new ways of considering transformative political action.

Having provided a clear understanding of what Butler's relational thinking entails, Chapter Three aims to pave the way towards considering *how* Butler's relational thinking can be traced within her thoughts on public assembly and alliances. Specifically, this chapter provides a thematic exploration of Butler's book *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015) as a potentially fruitful source with the broader problem of the allyship discourse in mind. In doing so, I explore Butler's politics of precarity and vulnerability; her ontological understanding of alliances as uneasy and unpredictable; and her ethics of cohabitation that centre around our obligations towards unchosen others.

Finally, Chapter Four provides a more concrete analysis of the allyship discourse with Butler's established relational lens. By drawing out the themes of "privilege", "support", and "action" from the prevailing definition of allyship, I identify the ontological, ethical and political shortcomings and assumptions within the allyship discourse. Through this, I argue that the allyship discourse perpetuates sovereign subjectivity, overly simplistic and dichotomous

thinking, as well as narrow understandings of support and action. In contrast, I show how Butler's relational thinking can avoid these shortcomings as it allows for more dynamic, intersectional, interdependent, uneasy, unpredictable and embodied ways of understanding allyship. In this way, Butler provides a theoretical lexicon that can speak to the "surplus in meaning" of allyship by critically emphasising – and embracing– what happens *between* bodies and buzzwords.

ABSTRAK

Die doel van hierdie tesis is om die begrip bondgenootskap (allyship) vanuit 'n relasionele lens te ondersoek en te verdiep. Deur te vra hoe die feministiese filosoof, Judith Butler, se relasionele denke 'n meer genuanseerde weergawe van bondgenootskap kan bied, stel ek voor dat daar sekere beperkings is binne die huidige akademiese en sosiale diskoers rondom bondgenootskap, veral met betrekking tot openbare byeenkomste in die vorm van protesaksie. Hierdie beperkinge word geïdentifiseer met verwysing na die "oorskot in betekenis" wat voortspruit uit dubbelsinnige dade van bondgenootskap op ‘n ontologiese, etiese en politieke vlak, soos spruit uit my persoonlike ervaring tydens protesoptrede, en die spesifieke gevallestudie van die "menslike skild" as 'n vermeende daad van alliansie. Elke fokuspunt van hierdie tesis poog dus om te skets hoe Butler se relasionele denke 'n nuttige woordeskat kan bied om met die dubbelsinnighede bondgenootskap om te gaan.

In hoofstuk twee van hierdie tesis begin ek uiteensit wat Butler se relasionele denke behels. Deur 'n breër oorsig van haar teoretiese oeuvre te gee, posisioneer ek Butler se relasionele denke as 'n verweefde weergawe van ontologie, etiek en politiek. Ek gaan dan voort om elk van hierdie drie aspekte onderskeidelik te bespreek. Sodoende wys ek daarop dat Butler se relasionele ontologie 'n alternatiewe ontologie bied teen soewereine subjektiwiteit; en 'n duidelike weergawe van die Butleriaanse onderwerp skets (as altyd in proses, diskursief, performatief en ondeursigtig). Hiermeesaam word ‘n beliggaamde sosiale ontologie voorgestaan. Ek wys ook hoe Butler se relasionele etiek in die diens staan van 'die leefbare lewe' wat poog om opgelegde verbondbaarheid (precarity) te verminder deur te fokus op ons gedeelde gevoel van onsekerheid, kwesbaarheid en verantwoordelikheid vir die ander. Laastens beweer ek dat Butler se konstruktivistiese verstaan van politieke agentskap vertaal kan word in 'n politiek van ‘ondermyning’ wat nuwe maniere kan bied vir volhoubare transformatiewe politieke handeling.

Na ‘n uitgebreide bespreking van Butler se relasionale denke is Hoofstuk Drie daarop gemik om aan te toon hoe Butler se relasionele denke na vore kom in haar gedagtes oor openbare samekoms en alliansies. Spesifiek bied hierdie hoofstuk 'n tematiese verkenning van Butler se boek *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015) as 'n potensieel vrugbare bron met die breër problematiek van die bondgenootskap-diskoers in gedagte. Sodoende ondersoek ek Butler se politiek van verbondbaarheid; haar ontologiese begrip van alliansies as

ongemaklik en onvoorspelbaar; en haar ‘etiek van kohabitasie’ wat sentreer rondom ons verpligtinge teenoor die ander wat nie deur ons gekies word nie.

Laastens bied hoofstuk vier 'n meer konkrete ontleding van die bondgenootskap-diskoers vanuit Butler se gevestigde relasionele denke. Deur die temas "bevoorregting", "ondersteuning" en "handeling" uit die heersende definisie van ‘allyship’ te uit te lig, identifiseer ek die ontologiese, etiese en politieke tekortkominge en aannames binne die bondgenootskap-diskoers. Hierdeur voer ek aan dat die bondgenootskap-diskoers soewereine subjektiwiteit in stand hou. Die diskoers skep ‘n denkraamwerk wat oorvereenvoudigend en tweespaltig is en sodoende ‘n eng begrip van ondersteuning en handeling skep. Hierteenoor toon ek aan hoe Butler se verhoudingsdenke hierdie tekortkominge kan vermy, aangesien dit ‘n meer dinamiese, interseksionele, afhanklike, ongemaklike, onvoorspelbare en beliggaamde maniere om bondgenootskap te verstaan, moontlik maak. Op hierdie manier bied Butler 'n teoretiese leksikon wat kan spreek tot die "oorskot in betekenis" van die alliansie deur krities te beklemtoon, en te verwelkom, wat tussen liggame en ‘modewoorde’ gebeur.

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I dedicate this work to the overarching body of people who formed part of the #FeesMustfall, #RhodesMustFall, and #EndRapeCulture movements. I think it shaped us on a deeply relational level in ways that we have yet to uncover but must continue to explore.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCING THE AMBIGUITIES OF ALLYSHIP

1.1. Context and Rationale

In contemporary politics, social justice movements – in the form of marches, vigils, or sit-ins – have often become synonymous with trending hashtags, social media activism, and a certain level of literacy regarding a variety of ever-evolving "buzzwords".[1] To this extent, the prevalence of public protest as a form of political activity during the last decade has sparked numerous conversations amongst scholars and citizens with regards to the various ways in which we can (and ought to) act politically. One of these points of conversation is the discourse surrounding the need for support within these protest spaces, specifically in the form of "allyship".

The concept of "allyship" will be outlined in more detail in the following section (1.2.), but for introductory purposes, allyship can be preliminarily understood as "people of a dominant or privileged racial, gender, sexual or other identity who support and seek to further the causes of those who lack such privilege" (Broido, 2000:3). It will be the overall aim of this study to investigate and deepen the concept of "allyship" as it manifests within protest spaces, and thus how it involves the act of publicly appearing in a bodily sense and openly resisting varying and intersecting forms of oppression. Before elaborating on the problem statement, research question and theoretical points of departure that frame this study, I wish to briefly provide some context surrounding social justice movements and the significance of allyship therein.

According to Judith Butler (2015:1), there has been a renewed interest in the notion of public assembly amongst social justice activists and scholars since the emergence of mass gatherings in Tahrir Square in 2010, during which thousands of bodies gathered in an act of protest. Following the Arab Spring, other prominent social justice movements such as Occupy Wall Street (2011), the Taksim Gezi Park protest (2015), #BlackLivesMatter (2013-current), #NoDAPL (No Dakota Access Pipeline, 2016) as well as The Women's March and #MeToo (2017) emerged. South Africa, in turn, starting in 2015, witnessed the largest student protest since the fall of Apartheid in 1994. Like many other students in South Africa at the time, I was confronted with many instances of lively public assembly that were addressing matters

[1] "A word or expression from a particular subject area that has become fashionable by being used a lot, especially on television and in the newspapers." (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2019)

pertaining to social injustice. These South African student movements,[2] such as #FeesMustFall (#FMF), #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) and #EndRapeCulture, were, inter alia, making demands for a free and decolonised education at universities across the country. By means of protest they exposed the way in which rape culture and racism are still systemically institutionalised in tertiary institutions in South Africa (Langa, 2017:6).

As a female, white individual within this volatile space of protest, I learned that my physical involvement on campus, in public spaces, during #FeesMustFall could be best described, and perhaps even justified, by the term "ally". Whenever the protests needed to gain momentum, there was often a call from protestors (either in the moment or on social media) for allies to join in, in order to strengthen and support the movement. Moreover, whenever people of a privileged position acted in any offensive or inappropriate way during actual protests, it would be suggested that they educate themselves on how to become a *better* "ally". While the matter of *being* an ally seemed of great importance from my personal and political point of view, it also started to pique my interest on an academic level. To this extent, the rationale for this study is twofold: in the first instance, this study can be seen as an act of philosophical sense-making of the phenomenological experience[3] of trying to be an ally. But more so, the second aim is to interpret and systematise some of the complexities that are attached to the concept of "ally" and "allyship" as buzzwords currently prevalent within social and academic discourses.

The impetus for this second aspect of my inquiry stems from my observation that there is a sense of ambivalence attached to the meaning of allyship within social justice movements, on social media, and within the broader scholarly discourse. In this respect, the definition of "buzzword" also becomes twofold. On the one hand, buzzwords can refer to certain catchy or (often empty) popular and fashionable phrases, but on the other, I will take them to also speak to the loadedness, significance and ambiguity of certain concepts. Because of this combination of pervasiveness, richness and ambiguity, buzzwords become a fruitful subject for investigation within the arena of political philosophy. This is the case not least because they help to structure political discourse and action, and therefore have concrete effects in the world.

[2] Which have been collectively be referred to as the #Fallist movements for ease of reference.

[3] Phenomenology in this context refers to the study of the way in which we experience things or phenomena in the world, and especially how (and why) we make sense of them.

Perhaps it can even be argued that buzzwords signify a colloquial version of the hermeneutical[4] phrase "surplus in meaning" chiefly coined by French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. According to Ricoeur (as explained by Kearney, 2006:xi), many expressions have a double meaning wherein a primary meaning refers beyond itself to a secondary meaning which can never be immediately accessible or fully resolved. It is exactly this double meaning which leads to a "surplus in meaning" that calls for interpretation and perpetual exploration, and that allows the expression to gain new meanings in new contexts. I say perpetual exploration because buzzwords, especially within the context of social justice issues, hint at, hide and sometimes expose the textured realities stemming from oppression in ways that cannot be immediately resolved. Underlying the "buzz" is therefore a larger hermeneutic call to continuously investigate the complex realities that are involved within the excess in meaning of the term "allyship", stemming from collective, overlapping and conflicting experiences of oppression (and privilege). To this extent, I use the term "surplus in meaning" as a helpful concept to make the claim that allyship (as a buzzword) also embodies "excess meaning" which requires further exploration.

In relation to the latter point, my understanding surrounding the "surplus in meaning" of the term allyship is also multifaceted. To my mind, there is in the first place a certain ambiguity to the way in which the concept of allyship is employed in academic literature and social discourse (this will be addressed in more detail in section 1.2.). In the second place, there is also an ontological, ethical and political ambiguity attached to the positionality of allies[5] and acts of allyship. This ambiguity will now be illuminated briefly with a case study of a perceived act of allyship that took place during #RhodesMustFall in 2015.

1.1.1. Exposing the Ambiguities of Allyship: Human Shield Case Study

On the 20th of October 2015, a group of white student supporters/ "allies" from the University of Cape Town formed a human shield[6] around black student protestors. This act of "solidarity" occurred after the #RhodesMustFall movement explicitly called for a human shield from

[4] Where "hermeneutics" refers to the philosophical field concerned with the theory and methodology of interpretation.

[5] The tension between allyship as a "positionality" and as an "identity" will be addressed within the final chapter of my thesis. While there are many academic sources that explain allyship as an "identity", I will argue that it should be considered as a positionality instead.

[6] Historically, a "[h]uman shield is a military and political term describing the deliberate placement of non-combatants in or around combat targets to deter the enemy from attacking these combat targets" (Bargu, 2016:299).

"white allies" via their official Twitter platform. This intervention was said to be motivated by the fact that rubber bullets had been fired at the group of predominantly black protestors the previous day (Wesi, 2015).

While it is unclear whether the police would have used force during this protest irrespective of the human shield, the public response via social media initiated a broader conversation. In fact, in a recent study on the influence of Twitter on the visual framing of social movements in South Africa, Bosch & Mutsvairo (2017:80) noted that the most retweeted image during the entire #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movement was of this particular human shield initiated by UCT protesters at Rondebosch Police Station. On various social media platforms, this event was labelled as an example of an act of active and appropriate allyship. While some were praising the white supporters for acting in solidarity, others problematised the fact that a white human shield was needed in the first place to protect black bodies, referring to the history of racial oppression and existing racial power relations in post-apartheid South Africa.

In their analysis of this image of the human shield (Figure 1), Bosch & Mutsvairo (ibid.:80) mention that this image is representational of the "social and structural setbacks facing present day South Africa". On the one hand, the human shield showcases solidarity from the white students and their willingness to actively combat and distance themselves from acts of racial discrimination. However, on the other hand, the human shield exposes and quite literally embodies the still prevalent racial inequality, even domination, that stems from the very need for white interference within these acts of mainly black protest – an interference apparently needed to prevent police violence against the black bodies by inserting supposedly inviolable white bodies in the line of fire. The tacit, performative, implication is that a truly human (i.e. white) shield is necessary, since the black bodies are not perceived as human or valuable enough by the police to prevent them from harming them. Bosch & Mutsvairo (ibid.) also argue that due to the historical context of this intervention by the white students, the event at Rondebosch has become inevitably associated with the discourse that marks black bodies as dangerous and threatening, and white bodies as essentially civilised and vulnerable, especially during acts of public assembly. Conversely, the bodies of white allies immediately made headlines, and were labelled as the protectors, saviours or heroes in their actions towards the black bodies. In this sense, the description of the action as at once a "beautiful, yet problematic intervention" (Wesi, 2015) is not far-fetched.

It is exactly this type of deep-seated ambivalence associated with the interpretation of a proclaimed act of allyship that exposes, for me, the double meaning of events such as this one, and of the meaning and value of allyship. By acting in response to a request to shield black bodies from police violence, white allies both responded directly to a request for help, and placed their own embodied vulnerability on the line, risking becoming targets of police violence themselves. At the same time, however, the very performance reiterated and somehow reinscribed the unequal value attached to bodies of different colours. One could say more cynically that the white students publically displayed white superiority – even if unintentionally. The human shield event could thus have a mixed legacy or effect in the world – in the short term it protected bodies against violence, but in the longer term it could have reinscribed the very logic it set out to combat. This is the kind of ambiguity that lies at the heart of acts of allyship.

Beyond this seemingly apparent exposition of the ambiguities involved with the human shield in particular, and allyship in general, this case study also gives rise to some of the pertinent questions and ideas that I would like to put forth regarding "allyship" in this study: namely, the ontological, ethical and political dimensions of acting in support of others. The question then becomes: how can one engage the ambiguity and complexities entangled with the "surplus in meaning" apparently inevitably accompanying allied bodies and their actions within spaces of public protest? In this regard, I will present some remarks below on the i) ontological, ii) ethical, and iii) political ambiguities underlying the human shield case study, as part of sketching the context and rationale of the study. As I will demonstrate in the coming sections, these three categories of ambiguity stem from the various dimensions in which allyship operates (by definition) as a way of *being* "privileged" (the ontological aspect), as an *ethical* response to support "marginalised groups", and a phenomenon inseparable from *politics* and political action (the political aspect). My theoretical focus in the next chapter will also draw out these same three categories, primarily through the work of Judith Butler, in an attempt to engage with the ambiguities of allyship.

1.1.2. Ontological dimension of allyship

Ontology is known as the philosophical study of reality that focuses on "beings or their being" (Smith, 2003). This human shield case study has ontological significance in the sense that it speaks to the phenomenological experiences of *being racially signified* as black and white bodies within the local space and time of protest (a student protest in South Africa post-

apartheid). Moreover, the ontological dimension of allyship is focused on the dual labelling process that takes the form of both internally and externally *being* racially signified. So, on the one hand, the "allies" have to self-consciously take up their whiteness in order to form the human shield for the black bodies. On the other hand, the labelling exercises of the onlookers and of the police also transpire overtly/covertly within the ontological dimension.

Moreover, the compounded historical and systemic phenomenological experiences related to race also play into this ontological encounter. I am thinking in this case specifically of how black bodies have been historically policed to the extent that there is a particular systemic injustice that transcends individual experiences, but is still reflected within particular encounters. Thus, the historical fact that black bodies are more susceptible towards police violence than their white counterparts is ontologically significant when a black person is confronted by the police.

This phenomenon adds to the idea that such phenomenological experiences involve an ontology that is embodied. The fact that the white body could offer protection by merely being in the space speaks to this idea of race as an embodied signifier. In other words, the historical construction of race has embedded certain modes of racialised being as an ontological condition of appearing with and to others. To this extent, their very "being there" in the flesh has an ontological significance with "surplus in meaning". The "surplus in meaning" lies in the ways in which the racialised body almost speaks on behalf of and for itself. For example, as a white body, you might be perceived as merely an onlooker or "ally" instead of a "primary protestor", while as a black body you might automatically be considered or assumed to be a "primary protestor", although they might merely be onlookers. These complexities arise even apart from the more fundamental problem that not all bodies are easily classifiable as either black or white. Thus, despite the subjective intentions or personal circumstances of each participant, the ontological significance of the human shield altogether creates a secondary layer of meaning (of racialised bodies), or even messaging, that transcends any attempt to immediately capture the embodied significance of the act. This is because it is often the case that the secondary meanings (for example the policing of black bodies as a driver for the formation of the human shield) evolve and deepen over time with the possibility of contributing, or even altering, the original significance. The act of forming a human shield therefore holds the excess meanings that stem from both the historical (militaristic) meanings, and that which is to come and will only be understood in retrospect.

While this case study is predominantly about the politics of race, there are numerous occasions where male, female, disabled, or queer bodies may also represent a similar excess in meaning. Another significant example could be that of the naked protests during #EndRapeCulture, where female protestors used their stripped bodies, in particular bared breasts, in order to speak out against the violence that is enacted upon (in this instance black) female bodies in South Africa (Gouws, 2017:22). Once again, the "surplus in meaning" lies with the excess of symbolism that is ontologically attached to the gendered understandings of naked bodies as hyper-sexualised. Thus, a surplus of meaning is embedded in the larger socio-symbolic order, to which the protestors on the one hand appeal, but elements of which, on the other hand, they also contest. For example, it might be said that the protestors appealed to an aspect of female nudity, its procreative power, while rejecting another aspect, its supposed shamefulness. As with the human shield, the embodied performance of protestors carries an excess of meaning and may therefore be interpreted in different ways that might or might not correlate with what the protestors wanted to "say" or express through the performance. I personally recall another instance where men or perceived "male allies" protested shirtless with phrases written on their bodies that read "society says this is okay", thereby pointing out the fact that they are not being sexualised in the same way as their female counterparts. This example also indicates an awareness on the part of the "privileged" male bodies of the ontological significance and excess in meaning that such a particular naked act embodies. These two different examples of naked protest within the #EndRapeCulture context therefore also expose the differential ontological significances attached to gendered bodies.

In addition, the "surplus in meaning" of these racialised and gendered acts makes another ontological point about bodies within protest spaces. As Rosalyn Diprose (2012:221) states, "surely I can think about the role of the body in politics without the help of a key thinker from the French or German tradition?" While the rest of the thesis will certainly draw on thinkers from the philosophical tradition, it remains meaningful to consider the intuitive manner in which this phenomenological experience was formative for the rationale of this study. Thinking back, I also recall what it felt like to be embodied within these political spaces as a white female individual, particularly when verbal expression becomes limited and silent but active bodies become the primary signifiers. This is often the case during gatherings where verbalisation is limited to a particular spokesperson leading (and often, thereby, interpreting) the protest, and possibly also to participation in group singing. Nonetheless, *being* there as a white ally still signifies an ontological, ethical and political message, and in this way, bodies become the most

appropriate and productive way of speaking – despite the possibility that these acts can be misinterpreted due to the surplus in meaning that seems inherent in bodily appearance.

The notion that politics is embodied, ontological and performative, started making intuitive sense to me, particularly within my experience as both "a body in alliance" and an "allied body". Perhaps this distinction needs further qualification. Being a "body in alliance" refers to being part of the collective body of a protest or assembly, but it does not necessarily indicate the specificity of such involvement. Therefore, the distinction of "allied body" aims to say something about the specific embodied positionality of allies within alliances from an ontological point of view. When I refer to the ontological dimensions or ambiguities of allyship, it therefore speaks to the material ways in which allies appear both to themselves and to others.

1.1.3. Ethical ambiguities in allyship

Beyond the ontological ambiguities in this case study, ethical questions also emerge. The fact that the intervention was simultaneously problematised and praised can be read as indicative of certain moral expectations related to allied intervention as such. In other words, by saying the intervention is "problematic", the commentator exposes an underlying moral invitation to act differently in order to be a "better" ally. Similarly, those who praised the intervention identified the action as morally permissible, even admirable. While these examples indicate a moral impetus, there is not a consistent normative underpinning to any of these expectations.

From the perspective of allies, it could also be questioned whether, given the context, the white students ought to have formed the human shield or not. Is there an ethical obligation for people within a privileged position to be allies? If so, on which premises are these obligations based? Moreover, there is also an ethical question regarding how those who choose to be allies enact their support. Should the white students have acted in such a way that they recognise the greater vulnerability of the black protestors even while refusing to invoke their racial privilege through the formation of a shield? But in response one might point to the fact that a white shield is precisely what the black protestors had asked for. In this regard, the social discourse often makes a distinction between good allies and bad or fake allies, possibly in too facile a manner.

Thus, a further ethical question to consider is: when does any specific act of support become morally problematic? Per the Twitter page of #RhodesMustFall, it is visible that the allies were "called to action". Does this call to action imply that the students were acting out of obligation, out of virtue, altruism, or a sense of self-fulfilment (as some members of the public on Twitter

suggested)? While all these questions might seem open-ended, I think they at least clearly expose the multifaceted ethical dimensions underlying allyship. What the social discourse and response to the human shield suggests is that there are ways of acting that are either *better* or *worse* when it comes to allyship. Whereas the ontological dimensions speak to ways of "being" (and being labelled – racially, for instance) that are often beyond your control, ethical ambiguities often relate to ways of *acting* (which include "doing" and "saying" things) that can be controlled (for the most part) by the subject. Yet, in action there is also scope for recalling surplus in meaning, as I will show. Ethical ambiguities therefore lie in the tensions between ways of acting within the normative spectrum of how one is expected to act.

1.1.4. Political ambiguities related to allyship

Finally, the example of the human shield cannot be read "purely ethically", i.e., outside of the context of politics, the political and political action.[7] To this extent, the prevalence of power dynamics within this case study demands an investigation that can account for the nuances of how identity functions within both contemporary South African politics, and the sphere of the political more generally. In this regard, by labelling this thesis as an investigation into the politics of allyship, I am trying to demonstrate, in the first place, something about how the term is utilised politically, but secondly that there exists a certain *politics* surrounding it. For example, what are the power dynamics at play that inform the actions of white allies? And the response of black protestors to them? Similarly, what power dynamics inform the black protestors' call for white allies and the white response to these calls?

Also, how can an ideology-critical approach such as critical race theory[8] help to clarify understandings of "whiteness" and "blackness" within a reading of the human shield as an example of allyship, in such a way that power relations are accounted for? It is also worth making explicit that, because allyship (understood as a positionality) is dependent on identity constructions that discern between "privileged" and "marginalised" groups, the political context of a specific encounter might dictate who are considered as allies. In other words, the idea that whiteness exclusively equates to allyship is not necessarily fixed, and different

[7] These concepts will be distinguished from one another in more detail in Chapter Two. For now, politics refers to the explicit political context, whereas the political refers more broadly to power dynamics and nuances on both the personal and institutional levels. Lastly, political action involves any acts within the sphere of politics or the political (i.e., marching, signing a memorandum, voting, standing for office).

[8] Critical race theory will not be employed as a theoretical lens in this study, but it serves as an example of the kind of theory that can account for the interrelations of race, power and identity.

configurations might be at play within other contexts, depending in particular on the specific social struggle at stake. While these terms will be clarified below, I argue that the mere occurrence of an act of allyship within a protest space already renders it politically significant.

I have chosen, for the purpose of the current study, to use the theoretical guidance of the feminist philosopher Judith Butler in order to uncover and clarify these different kinds of ambiguities as specified in this section. Specifically, I will argue that her relational theory provides a fruitful point of departure for this particular investigation (explained in 1.5. below). Before I make clear my specific problem statement and research question, I will briefly discuss the definitions of allies, allyship and alliances that my study will employ.

1.2. Defining Allies, Allyship and Alliances

In this section, I briefly elucidate how the core concepts related to "allyship" have been defined in the contemporary theoretical and social discourse, and, more specifically, how I will be employing these concepts throughout this thesis. While the terms "ally", "allyship" and "alliances" are deeply related, the subtle differences associated with these terms are of key significance to this project.

i) Allies

The first distinction I would like to make is between the terms "allies" and "social justice allies". Historically and politically, the term "ally" (plural: allies) is a familiar concept. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) an ally (noun) is someone "joined with another for a common purpose". As another general definition, YourDictionary (n.d.) defines the term "allies" as "two or more individuals, organisations, or countries who are working together toward the same purpose as a result of a mutual agreement".

A brief etymological overview of the term "ally" would be a useful point of departure to further define the term. The term "ally" (verb) originates from the Middle English *allien*, or "foreigner", as well as the Old French *alier* meaning "to combine, unite". The Latin origins of "ally" can be located in the term *alligö*, which means "to bind to". Therefore, all of the origins of the term speak to the phenomenon of strangers being bound to one another, or coming together in unity. What is interesting to me is the iteration of otherness and the action of "coming together" or uniting around a purpose that is already present within the etymology of the word ally. This insight also foregrounds the tension in "working together" with a "common

purpose" across difference. The idea of risk, and the uneasy togetherness within alliances which is already present in the etymological roots of the term, will be explored and unpacked throughout this thesis.

Another common association with the term "ally" stems from the political and especially military alliances established during the World Wars. The term "Allies" was used to name the nations fighting against the Central Powers in World War I, and the nations aligned against Germany, Italy and Japan in World War II. In this context, "allies" was often used as a military concept to indicate an alliance between two or more countries' armies.

However, the term "social justice allies" can be distinguished from the meanings of "allies" explicated above. In the context of social justice movements, the term ally has been in use since the 1960s, especially within LGBT+[9] movements. In this context, an "ally" is defined specifically as a person who is *not* a member of the LGBT+ community in terms of the person's own sexual identification, but *is* supportive of the group. One of the most prominent scholars in ally literature, Ellen Broido (2000:3) affirms the origins of the term ally in the LGBT+ sphere by noting that the term was used mostly to describe either heterosexual activists or advocates, or white students who addressed racism. It is interesting that in the earliest uses of the term, there is already the tension which I briefly mentioned above between a (mostly passively given) identity, such as "heterosexual" or "white", and a certain political choice or action, namely performing some form of solidarity or support toward an identity group from which you are ordinarily excluded. In other words, allies are made up of strangers who work together across the strangeness or difference in ways that relate back to my discussion of the ontological, ethical and political dimensions of allyship.

Broido (ibid.:4) also mentions that there are earlier works that address the concept of allyship without explicitly using the term (e.g., Edwards, 1970; Katz, 1978). Because of its origins in the queer movements, the term "straight ally" is also often used. Unfortunately, there are limited academic publications that define the term "straight ally", however, the following Wikipedia entry provides some interesting points of departure:

> An ally, straight ally, or heterosexual ally is a heterosexual and/or cisgender person who supports equal civil rights, gender equality, and LGBT+ social movements, and challenges

[9] While there are debates surrounding it, it has been stated that "LGBTQIA+ is the inclusive queer term which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex and asexual and/or allies" (Finamore, 2018; Gold, 2018). For the sake of brevity, I use "LGBT+" throughout the thesis.

> homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia. Not everyone who meets this definition identifies as an "ally". An ally acknowledges that LGBT+ people face discrimination and thus are socially disadvantaged. They aim to use their position as heterosexual or cisgender individuals in a society focused on heteronormativity to counter discrimination against LGBT+ people. (Straight Ally, 2017)

Two interesting remarks can be made in response to this definition. Firstly, it is significant that not all perceived allies identify themselves as allies, and simultaneously I would add that not all of those who identify themselves as allies are considered as allies by others. This tension within ally identification therefore also speaks to the normative and power-political underpinnings of allyship that will later be explored. Secondly, the reference made to "using" the position of allyship implies a very active aspect to political engagement as an ally. It is inferred that an ally does not merely acknowledge social justice issues, but rather actively participates to combat inequalities in service of the marginalised other. In some cases, the implications may be radical, such that white people actively work to demolish the social and symbolic structures that maintain their white status and privileges, which in effect destroy their "whiteness" insofar as it is productive of power and privilege. The position of relative power that the ally activates is in a sense deployed in "self-destructive" ways. The ways in which these power relations are critically embodied can therefore also become important in distinguishing between better and worse allies.

As a general definition beyond the LGBT+ origins, social justice allies are defined by Broido (2000:3) as "people of a dominant or privileged racial, gender, sexual or other identity who support and seek to further the causes of those who lack such privilege (such as people of colour or LGBT people)". It is Broido's definition of "allies" that I will be referring to throughout this study. What this definition signals by implication is that ally roles are dependent on certain historical constructions of identity based on oppression on one side and privilege on the other. In order words, the marker of "allies" relies on an understanding of who qualifies as "privileged" or "marginalised" in any given context, and these distinctions can best be made in reference to the historical construction of racial, gendered and sexual identities. Therefore, the very definition of an ally depends upon a certain critical interpretation of power relations. For example, by explicitly challenging the historical power dynamics associated with white individuals (who may find themselves in a position of privilege), these white people are able to be allies for people of colour. Similarly, men may act as "allies" for women within patriarchal power constellations because men are generally provided with relative power over

women within these constellations; similarly, heterosexual individuals may step forward as "allies" for LGBT+ people where the latter experience discrimination; and able bodied individuals can become allies for people living with disabilities and endure social injustice. And, of course, this also implies that one could be an ally in one instance, and in need of allyship within another.

ii) Allyship

Often within discussions surrounding allies, the term allyship is used (Broido, 2000; DeTurk, 2011; Gray, 2018). "Allyship" (noun) is defined as "the role or status of being an ally". Moreover, the term "allyship" is often employed when referring to the actions of allies. If an ally is someone who supports marginalised or oppressed groups from their position of privilege, then allyship could refer to the ways in which this support transpires. "Allyship" is also a more recent term and is therefore mostly associated with the social justice discourse mentioned above. I also view allyship as a more productive concept (when used as a shorthand) than ally or allies in the singular, as it can be employed as an umbrella term that recognises a collective effort, and includes the actions of those who self-identify or are identified by others as "allies" within the context of social justice movements and political action.

iii) Alliances

Lastly, the term alliance also needs to be briefly clarified. While political alliances often refer to coalitions between different parties with some common agenda, even within a very narrow pursuit, I will be employing the term particularly to refer to the collection of people that assemble physically in concert against a social injustice. To this extent, allies can be understood as a sub-grouping within the larger body of the alliance. According to Gray (2018:16), people who are fighting oppression of their own marginalised group are partaking in "advocacy". In contrast, people who combat oppression in a social system in which they hold privileged identity are participating in "allyship". In the case where allies decide to support such an alliance, they might form part of the broader alliance between people, while occupying a very specific role within the space of the alliance.

At least within academic and social discourse, alliances do not necessarily imply the presence of allies (ibid.:124). For example, it could be that everyone who gathers in protest are marginalised to a greater or lesser extent, and therefore find solidarity within their alliance. Allies are therefore presumed to be motivated differently than activists who assemble on the

basis of advocacy. Following this line of thought, it could imply, for example, that when black women and white women form an alliance against racist patriarchy, they are an alliance based on advocacy but there are no allies present, unless white men join them. On the other hand, it could also be interpreted that the white women are both advocates against patriarchy and allies against racism, and in the same struggle, black men would be positioned as both. This example therefore exposes the difficulty of reducing alliances to over-simplistic categories and thereby motivates for a more complex understanding of the internal makings of alliances more broadly. The nuances regarding alliances will be explored in more detail during Chapter Three where I will draw strongly on Judith Butler's thinking on alliances.

Having defined allies, allyship and alliances briefly within the context of this thesis, I will now demonstrate how these concepts will operate to frame this investigation within the problem statement and research question below.

1.3. Problem Statement

During my preliminary research on the concepts of the "ally", "allies" and "allyship", I noticed a particularly clear *disconnect* between the academic literature pertaining to social justice allies, and the social discourse surrounding the terms ally and allyship that can rightly be described as "buzzwords". The focus within the academic discourse mostly falls on the process of defining allyship, becoming allies, the experiences of allies, as well as the core descriptive characteristics pertaining to allies (Broido, 2000; DeTurk, 2011; Gray, 2018). However, on social media, the social discourse showcases a trend towards normative statements in the form of guidelines of how allies ought to act in order to be "good allies" instead of "bad" or "fake allies" (Kim, 2019; King, 2018; Pike, 2019; Suntrapak, 2017; Utt, 2013).

The lack of academic literature addressing the disconnect between what happens within scholarly discourse on the one hand, and on social media platforms on the other, leaves many of the philosophical assumptions made within the discussion of allyship unanswered. The research problem of this study therefore pertains to the fact that the academic discourse on allyship, and specifically the broad terms in which it is defined by Broido (2000), does not adequately engage with the ontological, political and ethical complexities attached to allyship within the social discourse. This insufficiency was particularly evident in the context of the human shield case study cited in the beginning of this chapter. Moreover, this problem of the absence of scholarly reflection on "allyship" is significant because uncritical engagement with

a buzzword in these political contexts could result in potential political inaction, the perpetuation of power imbalances and states of precarity, and enhancing the risk of inter-group violence. The task this study therefore set itself was to address this perceived lack of scholarly engagement with the loaded and pervasive term "allyship" when used as a buzzword within current social justice struggles.

1.4. Research Question

The primary research question of this study is as follows: in what way may Judith Butler's relational thinking contribute to a more nuanced and clearer understanding of the complex ambiguities or "surplus in meaning" accompanying the discourse of allyship?

I would therefore like to postulate that Butler's relational understanding of the subject (as an intertwined account with ontological, ethical and political dimensions) may help in addressing the limitations identified within the current discourse attached to the notion of allyship. Specifically, these limitations will be interrogated by drawing on the themes of "privilege", "support", and "action" as they are employed, by definition, within the allyship discourse.

The hypothesis of this study is thus that Butler's relational understanding of ontology, ethics and politics may deepen and enrich the concept of allyship. I will also propose that Butler's relationality can provide a more satisfying theoretical exposition of the assumptions present within the very definition of allyship surrounding "privileged identity", "acts of support", and the emphasis on "allied action".

However, it is not that her relational theoretical framework is only indirectly applicable to the question of allyship. Thematically, she has also shown an increasing interest in the phenomenon of social justice protest. Specifically, I will propose that Butler's book, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), most directly engages her theory of relationality in order to investigate the nature of alliances within the current political context. While Butler's thinking on alliances does not directly give an account of allyship, I would like to argue that her theoretical framework implicitly provides a helpful starting point to develop such an account, and my study will show how this is this case. I therefore employ Butler's thinking to push her ideas towards a consideration of the notion of allyship within social justice public protest. In what follows, I will briefly introduce the theoretical points of departure that frame this study.

1.5. Theoretical Points of Departure

While this thesis is not an exclusively feminist study, it does employ Judith Butler as a feminist political philosopher from a theoretical perspective. Theoretically, this thesis can therefore be situated within the broader field of feminist political philosophy. As a branch of both feminist and political philosophy, feminist political philosophy remains an evolving field that is diverse in its application. It is noted that, from the perspective of feminist philosophy, this branch often serves as a form of critique of mainstream politics as well as political theory, focused on "uncovering the ways in which women and their current and historical concerns are poorly depicted, represented, and addressed" within the political arena (McAfee et al. 2018). Furthermore, feminist political philosophy serves to develop "new ideals and justifications for how political institutions and practices should be organized and reconstructed" (ibid.).

In this sense, the project of reimagining allyship through a relational lens is closely aligned with the established theoretical project of feminist political philosophy. Moreover, allyship is also directly involved with, although not limited to, feminist matters. In fact, allyship is quite visibly connected with feminism when considering the contemporary discussions regarding male feminists (or allies) and intersectional feminism during political movements such as #MeToo.

In accordance with its subfields, feminist political philosophers can be grouped together into liberal and neoliberal, socialist and Marxist, post-structuralist, intersectional, as well as decolonial and performative feminist theories (ibid.). Within the historical trajectory of feminist theory there has been a noticeable shift, during the late 90s and early 2000s, toward performative feminisms by thinkers such as Butler (2004), Cornell (2007) and Mohanty (2003). This shift involved renewed attempts at "thinking of agency and freedom in more collective ways, which emphasise solidarity, relationality, and constitutive intersubjectivity" (Krause 2011:108).

Performative feminism therefore offers a framework to consider relational accounts of politics that move away from essentialist or universalising trends. Because of this relational, dynamic and fluid impetus, performative political theory is also described as being post-foundational.[10]

[10] Post-foundational thinking refers to the rejection of the idea that our understanding of the subject is dependent on an ultimate, final or absolute foundation. In this sense, post-foundational theory is often aligned with post-structuralist thought. In particular, Marchart (2007:2) explicates his post-foundational understanding by noting: "a post-foundational approach does not attempt to erase completely such figures of the ground, but to weaken

Precisely because performative political theory does not depend upon a shared foundation, there remains disagreement within this fairly broad school surrounding how democratic politics can be enacted and actualised within public spaces. Distinct attempts at answering questions related to democracy, the polis, and public politics can be located in European philosophical precursors such as Heidegger, Nancy, Badiou, Laclau, Levinas, Lyotard, Deleuze, Lacan, Habermas, Derrida, and contemporary theorists including Mouffe, Rancière and Žižek. While the specific thoughts of these thinkers are beyond the scope of this thesis, I wish to acknowledge their legacy and influence within the discourse of performative political theory.

By questioning how political agency and ethical subjectivity are constituted and how political judgements can be made, (feminist) performative political theory is also strongly rooted in the work of Judith Butler, particularly with her early emphasis on the idea that gender is performative.[11] However, there has also been growing scholarly attention towards reading Butler beyond her feminist and queer studies contributions as a political thinker.[12] Butler, who will be the central theorist of this study, can therefore be positioned within the subfield of performative feminism within the broader realm of feminist political philosophy.

Furthermore, this thesis aims to explore allyship from a relational perspective. As per the title of this thesis, this goal will be achieved by employing Judith Butler's notion of "relationality". As a general philosophical concept, "relationality" puts forth that the relations between subjects are more constitutive than any substantive understanding of a subject. More simply put, a relational mode of thinking would render it impossible to conceive of any particular thing without considering its relation to others. While relationality is most commonly theorised within the philosophical field of relational ontology, it has become a pivotal lens of

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their ontological status. The ontological weakening of ground does not lead to the assumption of the total absence of all grounds, but rather to the assumption of the impossibility of a final ground, which is something completely different as it implies an increased awareness of, on the one hand, contingency and, on the other, the political as the moment of partial and always, in the last instance, unsuccessful grounding". Thus, whereas an anti-foundationalist thinking would promote "the absence of all grounds" or a lack of foundation in the first place, post-foundationalist thinking aims to destabilise and interrogate understandings of the subject that are presumed to be absolute or based on a specific foundation.

[11] As theorised most extensively in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler argues that gender is performative. This argument proposes that it is the repeated performance of gender that creates the idea of gender itself. Gender is therefore something that one *does* and not an innate characteristic of the subject. I will elaborate more on this concept when I discuss Butler's understanding of the subject in section 2.3.2.

[12] See Chambers & Carver (2008); Lloyd (2009); Rushing (2010); Ruti (2017); Schippers (2014); Walsh (2015).

understanding fields such as politics, ethics, psychology, theology and sociology (Wesley, 2006:1).

More specifically, Butler employs the notion of relationality to argue that the subject is related not only to embodied others, but also to power and discourse. As I will show, Butler puts forth a relational thinking that conceives of subjects as ontologically dependent on one another, as well as the norms that govern them. All subjects therefore share this relationality, but the "performative" dimensions of subjecthood result in the different ways in which these relations play out. This particular understanding of relationality, which will be further clarified in Chapter Two, is visible throughout Butler's oeuvre, especially within the realms of ethics, politics and ontology.

Lastly, these theoretical points of departure within the overarching field of feminist political philosophy, and more specifically the theoretical paradigm of Judith Butler, will be put in conversation with existing scholarship within the discourse of allyship, as suggested by the overall research aims of this study. In what follows I briefly outline the structure for the rest of this thesis.

1.6. Chapter Layout

In order to develop the argument that Butler's relational thinking provides a rich alternative framework to consider the ambiguities and assumptions within "allyship", it is first necessary to provide a more in-depth discussion on what constitutes Butler's concept of relationality. Chapter Two will therefore provide a broader overview of Butler's oeuvre as a whole in order to demonstrate how her relational thinking is conceptualised. Specifically, I will provide a trajectory of Butler's oeuvre to show how her work develops "from norms to politics" over time (2.2.). This section will also thematically unpack some of the key terms that emerged in the various phases of Butler's work. In what follows, I will explicate Butler's relational understanding of ontology (2.3.), ethics (2.4.) and politics (2.5.) respectively, while alluding to their interrelatedness. The aim of this chapter is therefore to provide a more comprehensive theoretical point of departure to consider Judith Butler as a theorist with a distinctive thinking on "relationality" that can speak to the lived complexities of "allyship".

Having provided a broad overview on Butler's relational thinking within the chronological development of her work, Chapter Three will focus more specifically on Butler's relational take on "alliances" and "public assembly" as theorised in her later work, most pertinently in

Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly (2015). As mentioned, while Butler does not specifically address the concept of "allyship", I argue that her thoughts on alliances and assembly can be furthered to do so. This chapter will therefore take the form of a critical reading of *Notes* with the question of "allyship" in mind. The first section (3.2.) focuses on how Butler (ibid.) critically appropriates the terms "performativity" and "precarity" as interrelated within the political realm to argue that public assembly is "performative" and that the precarious should form alliances based on their shared dependency. Thereafter, it will be demonstrated how Butler thinks resistance can be mobilised through a politics of "vulnerability" and "dependency". Drawing on another core theme within *Notes,* the next section (3.3.) will focus on the "ontology of alliances" to explicate Butler's claim that the individual is already an alliance. This discussion will help us to elaborate on the unchosen aspects that feed into the uneasiness that underlies acts of public assembly for Butler. Butler's understanding of alliances as uneasy and unpredictable will therefore also be related to the surplus in meaning within alliances, as well as the textured realities that accompany unity across difference. Lastly, I will focus on Butler's discussion on "ethical responsibility" and the "space of appearance". This discussion will highlight the decisive influence in Butler's reading of Arendt and Levinas as precursors in her chapter named "Precarious Life and the Ethics of Cohabitation" in *Notes*. The exposition and critical reading of *Notes* that takes place in Chapter Three of my study draws out some of the core insights in an attempt to foreground the possibilities for a relational analysis of allyship.

Drawing on the theoretical insights of the previous chapters, Chapter Four of this study will provide a relational analysis of allyship within the discourse of embodied political protest action. This relational analysis will be achieved by revisiting and elaborating upon the social and academic discourse of allyship that was briefly introduced in Chapter One. Specifically, I will draw out and discuss three themes (already present within Broido's definition) from the allyship literature that a Butlerian analysis might deepen. The first theme which I discuss relates to the emphasis on "privileged identity" as a defining positionality for allies (4.2.). In this discussion, I will compare how Butler's concept of "precarity" could offer a framework for allyship that does not depend on a "strong ontology" of the subject. The theme of "privilege" will therefore speak to the ontological assumptions ingrained within the subjective theorisation of allyship identity. The second theme that was identified is based on the notion of "support" (4.3.). The definition of allyship presents "supporting those who lack privilege" as a necessary condition of being an ally. In the second section of this chapter, I elaborate on the ways in

which Butler's relational understanding of "support" can broaden its scope. The third and final theme pertains to "action". In this section (4.4.) I show how the social discourse of allyship emphasises the idea that allyship ought to be based on action instead of identity. Butler's discussion on embodied political action can therefore offer a theoretical basis to (re)consider allied action within alliances. Having established the various ways in which Butler can broaden and enrich the concept of "allyship", I will move on to discuss how a Butlerian take on the "surplus in meaning" of allyship can be read/interpreted within concrete instances of embodied action.

Each of the chapters in this thesis is intended to support the central claim that Butler's relational thinking offers a more nuanced vocabulary to address the ambiguities and "surplus in meaning" of allyship. The concluding part of my thesis will briefly revisit the human shield case study from a relational framework and provide some final remarks.

CHAPTER TWO: TOWARDS THEORISING JUDITH BUTLER'S RELATIONAL THINKING

2.1. Introduction

In order to demonstrate how Judith Butler's relational thinking can contribute to a deepened understanding of allyship, an extended explanation of Butler's relational thinking is required. In this chapter, I claim that Butler has a particular understanding of relationality, with interrelated ontological, political and ethical dimensions. While I offer these headings in my approach to Butler, the themes of ontology, ethics and politics also feature in plenty of secondary literature on Butler (Chambers & Carver, 2018; Lloyd, 2007). Butler (2004:27) herself affirms this way of reading her work in terms of the ontological, ethical and political underpinnings of relationality, when she writes that "relationality [is] not only [a] descriptive or historical fact of our formation, but also an ongoing normative dimension of our social and political lives, one in which we are compelled to take stock of our interdependence." In other words, for Butler, it is because we are relational beings in an ontological sense that we have ethical obligations towards others, especially within the sphere of politics and the political.

Before I elaborate on the content of Butler's relational thinking, some remarks regarding the approach of this chapter are in order. In the first instance, the intertwined nature of Butler's relational ethics, politics and ontology offers a methodological challenge to the extent that it is almost unthinkable to reduce her theory to any explicit concept, explanation, or even theoretical text involving relationality. This is true especially since Butler's understanding of relationality as an ontological and normative concept continues to develop throughout her oeuvre spanning over the last three decades. Sara Rushing (2010:285) echoes this notion of interrelatedness in Butler's work by asserting that "the diagnostic, normative, ethical and political are deeply intertwined for Butler, though they are not reducible to each other". This is a key insight that will also be incorporated into this current chapter's approach to Butler's relational thinking.

To offer an alternative to the temptation of reducing that which is entangled with simplistic, linear or conclusive explanations, Rushing (2010:285) proposes a helpful metaphor. She writes:

> If you were to attempt to "plot" Butler's work on a graph, you would not find her ideas progressing in a straight line from A to M to Z; instead, the movement of her thought would

resemble a Möbius strip, or a series of Möbius strips, exemplifying how her theories curve or circle around issues without attempting to resolve them.

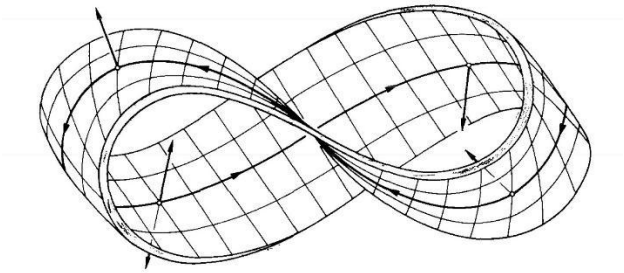

Figure 2: *Möbius strip*

For this reason, it would be problematic, if not impossible, to put forth any ultimate explanation of Butler's theory of relationality that is linear or complete, as her ideas on relationality are in themselves a counter to the latter type of theorisation. In fact, the very notion of relationality, as she deploys it, contradicts the conception of a substantive, transcendental or sovereign subject.[13] With this insight, Butler hopes to counter the perception that a theory can ever be fundamental, absolute, universal or complete. This idea of a counter or alternative type of theorisation is a recurrent theme in Butler's work, and therefore also filters through in the way that I will present her work. While I will provide a more in-depth account of Butler's theory as an alternative or counter to sovereign subjectivity, normative ethics and neoliberal politics at a later stage, it is important to take note that when I use the terms counter or alternative, it is with reference to the post-foundational impetus in Butler's work (as briefly mentioned in 1.5.).

In the spirit of post-foundational thinking, I will follow a thematic presentation of what I call Butler's relationality, as opposed to a linear and conclusive approach. While this thematic endeavour will certainly result in distinguishing terms such as ethics, politics and ontology from one another, it by no way means to imply that I, or Butler, thinks of these notions as separable from one another.

[13] The concept of the sovereign subject will be one of the central concepts within this thesis. In short, the sovereign subject refers to the "mastery of the self" and is thereby closely aligned with the idea of a "substantive" or "transcendental" subject that was proposed by Enlightenment reason. As Rushing (2010:286) notes, Butler continuously aims to dismantle the fantasy of self-mastery that undergirds the sovereign subject. All aspects of Butler's work, in particular the "norms" part, work to dismantle this figure, or this understanding of the self, as will become clear in the overview given in this chapter.

This claim leads me to a second remark. To further entertain the Möbius strip metaphor, perhaps it can be said that the strip appears to grow thicker or denser over time – as Rushing puts it, "her theories curve or circle around issues", and over decades of writing, these curves layer upon one another, in a sense weaving a three-dimensional, thick and rich account of these issues, always "without resolving them". I will thus try to do justice to the development of her thinking over time, showing how her understanding of the interlinkages between the self and other, and between ontology, ethics and politics, grows ever richer and denser, as she approaches the whole anew, every time from a slightly different angle. Even though I will not be taking a chronological approach to Butler's work on relationality, it would also be counter-productive to think of her work in completely achronological terms, as this might overlook the possibility that there is a certain progression in Butler's work. For example, there are instances where Butler responds to her critics, or revises certain concepts to slightly alter their meaning as her work matures. The concept "performativity" is a good example of a term that has expanded to the extent that you could trace, chronologically, how Butler expanded and developed its meaning (as will be discussed in Chapter 3). Moreover, the very nature of a post-foundational theory implies a sense of tentativeness, openness, fluidity, revision and adaptability. Thus, while I agree with Rushing that Butler's thinking develops in a curve or loop like the Möbius strip, I also believe that her inquiries develop and deepen historically "with the times" to respond to contemporary issues, and thereby can be broadly thematised according to their contextual development.

Lastly, the Möbius strip metaphor is also significant to this study as a whole, as it speaks to the core of my research problem which attempts to address the need for a theory that can engage the "surplus in meaning of allyship". In order words, perhaps the strip or loop that is always in flux, looping back over itself and revisiting phenomena continuously from a new angle, becoming thicker and thinner repeatedly, could also be a sort of hermeneutic metaphor for how meaning becomes always simultaneously concealed and apparent, but can never be finally fixed or resolved.[14]

In what follows, I seek to provide an overview of Butler's work that can situate her as a relational thinker, while simultaneously being able to consider her contribution conceptually

[14] The concept of "surplus in meaning" in this context suggests something similar to Martin Heidegger's contribution to the interpretation of the Greek word for truth (*a-letheia*) as "unconcealment" or an "uncovering of beings" (Kraus, 2009:3).

and thematically. For this reason, I will firstly (2.2.) give a brief overview of Butler's main intellectual trajectory and simultaneously introduce some of the core ideas and concepts which can be found interwoven throughout Butler's work. Thereafter, I will turn my attention in a more focused way to Butler's relational ontology (2.3.), ethics (2.4.), and politics (2.5.) respectively. In my concluding remarks (2.6.), I will point out how these discussions will become relevant for the chapters to follow.

2.2. Butler's Trajectory: From Norms to Politics

By naming Butler's theoretical trajectory over her lifetime as a development from norms to politics, I align myself with Moya Lloyd's (2007) attempt to capture and organise Butler's thinking. Lloyd traced the development of Butler's work by examining Butler's core ideas and simultaneously responded to the critical remarks often raised against her. In particular, Lloyd aimed to explore how Butler developed as a political thinker. Even though Lloyd's publication does not consider Butler's later work, I maintain that the development in Butler's oeuvre in this later work gravitates even more explicitly towards political theory. Lloyd's main description thus remains intact. While I make these broad distinctions in Butler's trajectory, I also wish to distinguish between explicit and implicit developments throughout Butler's trajectory. Thus, while a certain part of Butler's oeuvre is dedicated more explicitly to making sense of norms, ethics, or politics, this is not to say that the themes will not implicitly linger within other explicit theoretical ventures.[15] For example, even when Butler explicitly names her preoccupation to be with moral philosophy, previous ideas surrounding norms or politics might remain present, or even be developed further, as it were, under the surface.

With regards to Butler's relational thinking, I argue that her work develops, at least thematically, in three phases. While the first two phases mostly correlate to Lloyd's organisation of Butler's work, I argue that Butler's work following Lloyd's exposition shifted once more. The first phase (1986–1997), I argue, can be seen as an enquiry into "norms", "subject formation", "discourse", and the operations of power. The second phase (2000–2009), often referred to as the Butlerian turn, builds on the former, but shifts the focus to questions

[15] Having written extensively over the past few decades, Butler's oeuvre proves to be as dense as it is diverse. This claim can partly be accounted for by the range of theoretical paradigms which she deploys. While Butler is most often thought of as a feminist theorist, she has also been described as Freudian, Foucauldian, Marxist and a post-structuralist. With these various sources of influence, it is no wonder that Butler is also well known for making use of eclecticism within her arguments in order to bring together different theorists in strategic, and sometimes unexpected, ways.

regarding the ethical encounter more broadly within the *politics* of the other. In this second phase, there is a large emphasis on concepts such as "precarity", "grievability" and the "liveable life". Lastly, I argue that in the third phase, visible in Butler's most recent work (2012–2016), she critically appropriates her former (more theoretical and abstract) work to theorise pertinent questions within democratic politics, especially related to "resistance", "responsiveness" and "bodies in alliance". For this reason, I wish to briefly trace how Butler's oeuvre developed from a focus on norms to politics by using my own three-tiered structure (subject birthed by norms, Butlerian turn to ethics, performative politics) based on Lloyd's two-tiered structure (norms and politics).

2.2.1. Butler Emerges: Subject Birthed by Norms

Butler studied philosophy in the 1980s (Salih, 2002:1). Based primarily on her doctorate, her first book, titled *Subjects of Desire* (1986), investigates how particular notions of "death" and "desire", as developed in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit,* impacted on twentieth century philosophers. Building on her work of subject formation in the Hegelian tradition and subsequently in psychoanalysis, Butler moved toward analysing particularly how gender identity is constructed.

Undoubtedly, Butler is most acclaimed for her second publication, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990)[16]. Within the field of feminist theory and queer studies, this work is often regarded (ironically) as a foundational text for contemporary understandings of gender and identity formation. By calling the category of "woman" into question, Butler describes how the "woman subject" is always a subject-in-progress that is constructed by "discourse". Terms that emerge in this book such as "gender performativity", the sex/gender distinction and "subversion" are some of the key concepts when considering Butler's theory. These concepts will thus be defined and discussed at more length in sections 2.2.3. and 2.5.2.

Critics of *Gender Trouble* accused Butler of a neglect of the body (Salih, 2002:4). This accusation is aligned with one of the prominent objections/points of criticism against *Gender Trouble*, namely, that Butler reduced gender to language and discourse, and thereby ignored the embodied reality and placed embodied agency as subordinate (Bordo, 1993: 292). In response to the call to address the materiality of bodies, Butler's second book *Bodies That*

[16] Reissued in 1999 with another introduction written by Butler.

Matter (1993) can be viewed as a genealogy[17] of the discursive construction of bodies. By drawing on a range of thinkers – such as Althusser, Freud, Lacan, Foucault, Kristeva, and Derrida – Butler endeavours to establish the philosophical basis upon which she articulates her theory of the discursive construction of the (material) body, and what she understands to be an "embedded" and "interdependent" relationship between "materiality" and "discourse" (Cotter, 1994:1).

This endeavour entails, to a large extent, a continuation of Butler's ideas regarding the relationship between sex, gender and discourse in *Gender Trouble* as it manifests or materialises ("matters") within the body. Furthermore, this discussion in *Bodies that Matter* also attempts to explain how performativity can be related to materialisation – how the body in a sense becomes what it performs. This text is therefore of utmost importance to conceptualise how Butler thinks about the body and language.

Nevertheless, Butler later writes: "I confess, however, that I am not a very good materialist. Every time I try to write about the body, the writing ends up being about language" (Butler, 2004:198). While Butler's theoretical relationship with the subject of bodies and embodiment is one that evolves, the persisting tension between norms, the body and language in Butler's work will become one of the key theoretical explorations of this study.

Still, as part of the first phase focused on norms formative of the subject, Butler published *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, in 1997. This book explores how language, or rather linguistic meaning, is at play within the discursive constitution of the subject in the context of hate speech and censorship. A core question that Butler deals with is whether language enacts what it names, or more simply: do words wound? (Salih, 2002:116). The main argument put forth in this book is that "language is not necessarily (or indeed ever) an effective performative; in other words, it does not always enact what it names" (Salih, 2002:102). What Butler means by this is that speech acts do not take place in neutral spaces, and therefore the utterer of language does not necessarily intend or control the unforeseen meanings arising from an utterance – the meanings of both speech and action are context-dependent. This

[17] The term genealogy refers to a philosophical method that uses historical critique to reveal the origins of a particular concept. The concept of genealogy was especially employed by Nietzsche and Foucault (Hills, 1998). In Butler's case, she uses the genealogy as a method to investigate how the concept of "bodies" developed historically, enabling her to "overturn norms by revealing their origins".

investigation into the performative function of speech-acts is supported by examples of hate speech and pornography.

Whereas *Excitable Speech* revolves around the "injurability" caused by terms and words, *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) "argue[s] that subjects are attached to the power structures that subordinate them" (Salih:2002:119). This publication therefore revolves primarily around the subject's relation to power, while questioning the idea of an ontological separation of psychic life and the operations of power. Butler criticises Foucault for leaving the psyche out of his accounts of power, the soul and the body, and she asserts that there is potential for subversive excess in a psyche that is never fully determined by the laws that subject it. Moreover, Butler's relational thinking surfaces in this exploration of subject formation, as she argues agency is linked to the self's ability to be distanced from the prospect of self-coherence. Part of psychic life and the agency to challenge the operations of power is therefore dependent on an understanding of the self as opaque to itself. Butler's account of the subject, which is expected to deny the possibility for self-coherence, is also strongly linked to her post-foundationalist impetus that seeks to dismantle sovereignty in the subject.

Butler continues the project of *Psychic Life* with *Antigone's Claim* (2000), a book that features an investigation into kinship and associated norms by analysing the character of Antigone in Sophocles' plays. More specifically, she presents an analysis of kinship based on the dynamics of social power (Chimitile, 2000: 222). While this text is closely related to her first decade of work, it also paves the way forward with a model for considering norms and social power as a structural force in uncovering and subverting ethical and political hegemonies. This text can therefore be read as a transitional work that situates how Butler's preoccupation with norms and discourse, as systemic, will feature in her more explicit ethical and political texts to come.

Norms thus feature prominently in this early part of her oeuvre, from discursive and performative norms and power structures such as kinship, that produce the (gendered) subject and material bodies, to discursive and other laws that shape the psyche. Broadly speaking, one could say that in this phase she demolishes the traditional notion of "nature" as a given and static sphere of reality that precedes human realities. This is done with her insights that not only our "culture" but our very "nature" as humans, even or perhaps particularly our sexual and gendered "nature", is shaped through normative structures that permeate our meaningful worlds. At the same time, she insists that this does not mean we are predetermined – in every instance of an operative norm at work, there is something (a psyche or a body or a particular

performance or something else) in dynamic interaction with the effective norm, so that outcomes in the form of meanings are always produced within dialectical tension, in dynamic and unending relationality.

2.2.2. The Butlerian Turn: Ethics and Politics

As per the heading of this section, it is implied that Butler's trajectory shifts from her early work's focus on norms to the arena of ethics and politics. Many scholars[18] refer to this shift as "the Butlerian turn". It is argued that Butler's turn to ethics and politics is most notable in her post-9/11 writings. However, there is debate among Butlerian scholars and critics regarding the implications of this description as a "turn" towards ethics and politics. While some of these scholars are in search of the normative foundations that foreground Butler's so-called ethical and political theory, others seem to argue that there is no "turn" and that, instead, politics and ethics had always been present in Butler's work. While it is rather straightforward that Butler has always implicitly engaged with questions regarding the normative fields of ethics and politics throughout her writings on sex, gender, language, discourse, and operative norms, it is also hard to deny that some of her later texts can be more explicitly categorised within the fields of ethical and political theory. This is because she more explicitly tackles concrete ethical and political issues, instead of remaining on the rather more general and abstract level of her earlier work.

In a conversation with political philosopher William Connolly, published in the article *Politics, Power and Ethics: A Conversation Between Judith Butler and William Connolly* (2000), Butler expressed her ambivalence towards the supposed turn to ethics[19], as she feared that (normative) ethics would replace politics, in the sense of a focus on the operations of power. This claim was interpreted by many as Butler's dismissal of the field of ethics within her own theorisation and thinking. As a result, Butler took her critics by surprise with her first explicit venture into the field of moral philosophy. Once again, the Möbius strip metaphor surfaces. Butler's oeuvre as a whole can be seen as a three-dimensional structure which shows different "faces" as one

[18] Examples include Chambers & Carver, 2008; Dean, 2008; Kirby, 2006; Lloyd, 2007, 2008; Loizidou, 2007; Thiem, 2008.

[19] The ethical turn in this instance refers to the increasing amount of (postmodern) thinkers that "turned" their attention towards ethics despite the overarching history of "ethical critique" against normative ethics within postmodern thought. This turn to ethics was particularly spearheaded in response to Heidegger's philosophical work and his connections to Nazism. There was thus a countermovement within postmodernism to establish its compatibility with ethics (Voloshin, 1988:96).

turns it over – it can more explicitly show its normative, ethical, political, or ontological concerns, depending on which lens one uses or at what angle one looks at the whole. Thus, Butler's concerns with normative ethics are entangled with her (ontological) disdain for the sovereign subject.

One of the first hints towards Butler's interest in ethics can be located in her book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004). In the final chapter, Butler (ibid.:130) reaches the insight that "what binds us morally has to do with how we are addressed by others in ways that we cannot avert or avoid". In this text more broadly, Butler investigates the aftermath of 9/11, specifically with regards to the effects of violence. Butler (ibid.:xi) attributes this project to the ways in which "the conditions of heightened vulnerability and aggression" can serve as an opportunity for the US to critically redefine itself within the global arena. Through plenty of captivating examples, Butler demonstrates what she calls a differential allocation of "grievability" at work in the world today. This differential allocation of grievability was chiefly explicated with her notion of "normative violence". The most prominent concepts emerging from this text thus include: "grievability", "normative violence", "precariousness" and "precarity".[20] One can clearly see here that she again draws on her earlier work on language and power and their constitutive normative effects – not even death, violence or grief can be straightforwardly regarded as natural events or pre-discursively "given" in their immediate meaningfulness. Whom we grieve, and what we call violence, are infused with constitutive normative power. To show that she never leaves behind the concerns discussed under the "norms" phase, I will be introducing and discussing these concepts in more depth in section 2.4. on Butler's relational ethics.

While *Precarious Life* initiated moral questions, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) is explicitly framed as Butler's first extended study of moral philosophy. In this text, Butler approaches the problem of subjectivity and subject formation within the realm of ethics and ethical philosophy. Butler chiefly employs the prominent ethical considerations of thinkers such as Foucault, Nietzsche, Adorno and Levinas in order to argue that "the subject is not the ground for ethics, but rather the problem for ethics" (Hodapp 2013:115). This claim is based on Butler's ongoing project to ensure the demise of the sovereign subject, and therefore promotes the notion that the self is intrinsically relational, and only emerges through the

[20] These terms will be defined and explicated later in this chapter; however, it is important to note that they are central to my study.

address of the other within the context of language and normative structures, which are beyond the control of the self. She asks how we can keep the subject morally accountable after the demise of the sovereign subject. This also leads to Butler's formulation that the self is opaque to itself, but that this limitation is capable of transforming notions of ethics and responsibility, instead of rendering them void. Butler's arguments presented in this book will be discussed in more detail in my section on Butler's ethics (2.4.), alongside key terms such as the "opaque subject" (2.3.), and ethical responsibility for the Other.

Frames of War: When is a Life Grievable (2009) is a theoretically rich text that thematically continues the project of *Precarious Life.* Mazurski (2008:114) notes that the main premise of this book is that specific lives cannot be framed as injured if they are not acknowledged as living in the first place. In this way, Butler's "relational social ontology" presents a new frame through which adverse effects of contemporary warfare can be considered (Mazurski, 2008:115). This text will thus become helpful when discussing Butler's social ontology in Section 2.3.3.

2.2.3. Towards Performative Politics

I would like to advance that following her book, *Frames of War: When is a Life Grievable* (2008), Butler's work shifted once more towards a more explicit preoccupation with performative politics. My interest will be focused on this (what I identify as a) third part of Butler's trajectory; however, I will keep on drawing on the insights that crystallised in her earlier two phases as they offer more conceptual depth towards thinking about the concept of "relationality" within contemporary politics. In this, I will follow her own example of circling back upon earlier work and themes to approach newer ones, and allow them to mutually interrogate and enrich each other.

Perhaps this shift towards "performative politics" can be attributed to the changes that occurred globally within the political arena within the last decade. Whereas the works produced during the so-called "Butlerian turn" showcased an acknowledgement and concern with ethics and politics specifically within the context of 9/11 and the politics of war, Butler's more recent work responds explicitly to the increase of mass assemblies globally. Because of this perceived global shift, the manner in which Butler employs previous concepts such as "performativity" and "precarity" can be viewed as placed in an entirely different context than her writings in response to the global political arena post-9/11, and thus new aspects of her earlier work are

highlighted and fleshed out. Thus, speaking to her previous work, Butler's work between 2012 and the present features the amalgamation of all her previous writings in response to contemporary political challenges. The contemporary political landscape that Butler is interested in revolves particularly around renewed forms of public assembly against statelessness, poverty, systemic oppression and the persisting rise of Zionism. What makes these forms of assembly a "renewed" interest is Butler's insight that the physical spaces of mass assembly became "synecdoches for the uprisings and their demands". The physical space of mass assembly therefore cannot be separated from our understanding of the assembly itself. Recent political movements are therefore shaped by its spaces. To this extent, Butler also became interested in the "material settings of mobilisation" (Riofrancos, 2017:260). Consider Taksim Square, Wall Street, or, in the South African case, the Rhodes statue as examples of how the movements and the spaces they were held in became intertwined.

The following texts, which explore these themes in both similar and distinct ways, are of significance for this phase of Butler's trajectory:

In *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (2012), Butler incorporates various philosophical positions to offer a critique of Zionism, especially in the context of Palestinian dispossession. By arguing that the "obligations of cohabitation do not derive from cultural sameness, but from the unchosen character of plurality", Butler was able to develop a more general theory of cohabitation with resonance beyond Palestine. By employing an encompassing range of thinkers, Butler disputes the notion that a narrowly Jewish framework can serve as a critique for Zionism. Instead, she advocates for an ethical position where the obligations of cohabitation are not derived from cultural sameness. Butler's emphasis on the "unchosen character of social plurality" will also surface powerfully in her later understanding of alliances more generally understood.

Dispossession: The Performative in the Political (2013) draws on a series of conversations between Butler and Athena Athanasiou, focusing on how left politics can respond to "newer feminist and queer concerns with resisting precarity". These "newer concerns" are specifically in reference to contemporary social justice movements. As such, this text is placed explicitly within the context of the Egyptian revolution in 2011 and the geopolitical position of Greece at the time. In these conversations, Butler and Athanasiou consider how to formulate a theory of political performativity that can address the ambivalence of "dispossession", including how to become dispossessed of the "sovereign self". This text provides a rich collection of ideas on

"what makes political responsiveness possible" in times of injustice and "systematic dispossession" (ibid.:xi). The theme of dispossession in terms of the tension between the precarious (those dispossessed of a home, citizenship, or the law) and a renewed account of subject formation (as a dispossession of sovereign subjectivity) will feature throughout this study.

As mentioned in the first chapter, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015) will be discussed as a key text within this study. In *Notes*, Butler investigates the political assemblage of "bodies in alliance". Butler's concern is therefore in uncovering the ontological, political and ethical dimensions present within coalitional alliances.[21] By drawing on her previous theory on "gender performativity", Butler argues that public assembly is also performative in nature. Through weaving together various contextual examples of assembly, Butler brings attention to the social conditions associated with "precarity", the bodily dimension of protest, and the importance of "interdependence" and performativity within a spatial context (Diming, 2016: 20). Moreover, Butler further develops what she calls the "ethics of cohabitation" by drawing strongly on precursors such as Adorno, Arendt and Levinas. Chapter Three will be devoted to a close reading of *Notes* and will therefore provide a more detailed exposition.

Butler's renewed focus on assembly and resistance is furthered in the collected work *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Butler et al., 2016). As suggested in the title, this volume is dedicated to "challenge and reformulate" the popular assumptions connected to the concepts of "vulnerability" and "resistance"; namely, that they are mutually oppositional. In its critical approach, this volume leads to further questions on "bodily exposure", "agency" and "the problem of precarity". Butler's forthcoming book *The Force of Nonviolence: The Ethical in the Political (2020)* also promises a prevailing concern with the question of ethics and politics within contemporary examples of activism, but will not be included in the present study due to time constraints.

Because this third phase in Butler's trajectory ("performative politics") is very much "live" in its development, it provides a timely theoretical framework to consider contemporary protests

[21] I would like to recall an earlier point here. Butler does not explicitly concern herself with "allies" in *Notes*. Her concern is rather with alliances, or public assembly more broadly, as that focus provides the basis for her to formulate how the "precariat" (those who are differently precarious) assemble. Nonetheless, her relational insights on alliances hold promise for my own theorising of allyship later on.

and modes of resistance in greater depth. However, it would be theoretically irresponsible to isolate Butler's current thinking from her previous two decades' body of work as they provide the conceptual backbone for most of Butler's terminology that she continues to employ. For this reason, the rest of Chapter Two will be devoted to tracing Butler's relationality (within the realms of ontology, ethics and politics) by explicating the key terms as introduced in this brief overview.

2.3. Butler's Relational Ontology

In this section, I discuss the main components of what could be dubbed a Butlerian ontology. To reiterate, this exposition is not meant to put Butler's relational ontology on a clearly defined grid, nor to suggest a foundationalist (complete, static and definitive) overview of her oeuvre. Instead, the purpose of this discussion is to provide a lens through which the ontological significance of Butler's relational thinking – as an unfolding and dynamic project – can be viewed. Here it is imperative to repeat that Butler's ontology cross-cuts through her ethical and political thinking, further obscuring any attempt to reduce her relationality exclusively to the field of ontology. However, in order to understand these distinctive yet inextricably connected concepts (relationality in politics, ethics, and ontology), it is necessary theoretically that one interrogates each of these concepts in turn in more depth, without ever losing sight of their interwovenness. In this regard, I consider ontology as a first point of departure, or a first angle from which to view and describe the whole of relationality in Butler's thinking.

My discussion of the ontological dimension of her work contains three sub-sections that I consider to be most prevalent in Butler's relational mode of thinking. First, I will consider the ways in which Butler presents an alternative ontology to essentialist ontology (2.3.1.). The second section will focus on Butler's ontological view of the subject in relation to norms. Through this I will discuss the various dimensions of the Butlerian subject (2.3.2.). Lastly, the significance of the relationship between a social ontology and the body will be presented, in order to demonstrate how relationality is embedded in embodied experience (2.3.3.).

2.3.1. Butler's Alternative Ontology

It seems appropriate to now return to the above-mentioned notion that Butler's form of relational ontology is first and foremost an alternative or counter-ontology. Writing against the foundationalist ontological tradition of Enlightenment philosophy, Butler starts off with a

critical position on pre-existing accounts of ontology. As White (1999:156) noted, Butler's task appears to be an "interrogation of the construction and circulation" of traditional ontology.

In other words, Butler is critically re-evaluating the very formation and perpetuation of ontological discourse as it occurred historically. Butler's main concern relates to any ontology which aims to be a meta-level theory of reality. To this extent, Butler opposes any ontology that is couched as descriptive of some state of pre-linguistic, given, natural or ahistorical *being*. Butler problematises this mode of ontology, as it assumes that there is a mode of being which precedes language, and is so foundational that it becomes exempt from any form of interrogation, including any critique of domination that might result from entertaining such foundationalist ideas. According to Butler, this impervious type of ontology, which seeks to naturalise some version of reality, is grounded in "ontological essentialism". In an attempt to further juxtapose this alternative ontology against "ontological essentialism", White (1999) distinguishes between "strong" and "weak" ontology. I will now briefly discuss how these two modes of ontology stand in opposition to one another.

In short, according to White (1999:155), a "strong" (or essentialist) ontology is based on a sovereign conception of the subject.[22] While there are various contexts in which the concept of the "sovereign subject" applies, I employ this term to describe the transcendental subject of Enlightenment philosophy which is supposed to be transparent to itself and in control of all its thoughts and actions. According to the likes of Kant and Descartes, ontological claims about the self are made possible due to the epistemological certainty of the knowing Self; a certainty, first of all, about the knower's self and their own existence, or at least the existence of their own rational mind, à la Descartes. In other words, the theory of reality is grounded in a stable and knowing subject, almost God-like. Indeed, as Iris Murdoch (1970:80) aptly writes: "Kant abolished God and made man his God instead". Thus, instead of focusing on *being* in a phenomenological and existentialist sense, essentialist ontology can only be understood in a metaphysical sense. In other words, essentialist ontology considers *being* in terms of supposed fundamental characteristics of reality (givens), thereby neglecting to acknowledge various existential realities (such as embodied experiences of oppression).

[22] The concept of the sovereign subject is therefore also a core critical term in feminist philosophy, specifically as employed by de Beauvoir (via Hegel). Furthermore, this concept has a multitude of possible meanings for de Beauvoir. Lloyd names four different meanings, namely: equated with masculinity; in feudal terms; in the context of the divine; and as a synonym for Hegel's master/slave dialectic (Lloyd, 2007:1).

This strong view of ontology has since been widely criticised by philosophers such as Heidegger, Sartre, de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty[23], and Butler's critique stands within this same tradition, partly due to her philosophical training. Butler's specific trouble with essentialist ontology is that it is built on the incontestable nature of the transcendental subject[24] – a supposedly ahistorical, naturally "given" ground for all knowledge, which would stand beyond all interrogation concerning its power implications. For her, any such ontology contains a "normative injunction that operates insidiously by installing itself into political discourse as its necessary ground" (White, 1999:156). She is thus rightly suspicious about the relations of domination that inevitably become solidified and justified on the basis of strong ontological claims. Clearly, Butler's ontological preoccupations cannot be meaningfully separated from her normative, i.e., ethical and political, concerns. The trouble that Butler has once again echoes her understanding of the subject as being "called into existence" through discursive power structures and as therefore shaped by norms from the ground up. There is thus no sovereign, natural, pre-linguistic, value- and power-free subject that can serve as "a necessary ground" for any political theory.

As a counter to an ontology based on the transcendental subject (or any other comparable, essentialist, metaphysical construct, be it God, or Cosmos or Reason), Butler's relational ontology is twofold. On the one hand, it serves as an attempt to critically engage the pre-existing or traditional accounts of ontology, what. On the other hand, it is also possible to locate Butler's writings on (and within) her own, alternative mode of ontology, understood as constitutively relational. White (1999:157) characterises Butler's ontology as an example of "weak" ontology. For White (1999: 158), weak ontologies, in contrast to strong or essentialist ontologies, are based on:

> the acceptance of the idea that all fundamental conceptualizations of self, other and world are contestable, and awareness that such conceptualizations are nevertheless unavoidable for any sort of reflective ethical and political life.

[23] And of course, alongside other branches of philosophy that problematise the thinking "I"

[24] The transcendental subject was introduced by German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Similarly to the Cartesian subject, the transcendental subject is an "I" that can necessitate objective, absolute and unified *being*. Indeed, the subject constitutes a mind with a "complete view" to account for "the partial views" of phenomena. In this way the transcendental subject is able to discern between "things in themselves" (noumena) and the way things appear (phenomena) (Burgess, 2013).

Thus, by means of a more contestable or tentative understanding of the subject, "weak" ontologies attempt to provide a "stickier" conception of human subjectivity than that of essentialist ontology. They do not do away with ontology altogether, as White explains, because they understand that ontologies are indispensable, but they also acknowledge the need for "fundamental conceptions of self, other and world" to be fluid and varied in order to accommodate more concrete phenomena, richer and more complicated ways of being, and to be self-conscious about how ontologies can be abused for oppression. "Weak ontologies" are therefore considered "stickier" to the extent that they are more malleable and textured, making it difficult to neatly contain and categorise different modes of human subjectivity. By implication, they also offer a richer spectrum of ontological dimensions for existential realities. As I will show in the next section, Butler's subject also contributes in another way to a richer ontology by accounting for the dimensions of intersubjective being understood as discursive. In contrast, metaphysical ontology is incapable of providing a textured framework for existential realities because it is concerned with "being" or "consciousness" in-itself, instead of for-itself.[25] By focusing on existential realities, a weak ontology in this way does not centre on any innate or universal ways of being, but rather brings the complexities of intersubjective experience to the forefront. Weak ontologies therefore help to preclude the essentialist tendencies that accompany being in-itself.

Another point that White (1999:156) touches on is the impact of Butler's weak ontology within feminist philosophy. In this respect, Butler's struggle against essentialism continues within the parameters of feminist theory itself as well. Butler was particularly critical of attempts by feminist philosophers to provide a liberating philosophical account of women that could fit all women, and that presupposed a single and stable female subject. Butler's resistance towards feminist essentialism is well captured in the following phrase: "perhaps, paradoxically, 'representation' will be shown to make sense for feminism only when the subject of 'women' is nowhere presumed" (Butler, 1990: 8). Butler is therefore in opposition to the view of sex as "natural". This is an excellent example of how Butler sees ontological starting points as affecting our political struggles. The feminist term "woman", if deployed in a strongly ontological manner, may itself become harmful to feminist praxis if it denotes too rigid and naturalistic an understanding of that crucial term. Following on from this claim, I would add

[25] This thesis is also expressed by Heidegger and Sartre's similar claim that "existence precedes essence", which implies that there is no inherent nature to describe modes of being and acting (Abbagnano, 2020).

that Butler's critique of sovereign agency within ontology can thus be aligned with her broader project to denaturalise the world. To "denaturalise" the world in this instance does not suggest a denial of all things "natural", however, it does attempt to challenge the assumption that it is possible to think of the "nature" of things outside of the norms that govern it. Thus, denaturalising the *understanding* of the world and nature, and not *nature as such.*

For this reason, White (1999:156) argues that the nature of weak ontologies makes it almost impossible to derive any sort of determinate principles for ethics and politics from it. However, as Butler would maintain, perhaps both politics and ethics precisely *demand* a theory which is not based on any sort of determinate principles in order to avoid the shortcomings of essentialist ontologies. Perhaps it is precisely the indeterminacy of ontologies which calls for an ethical response of a particular nature. This is why the following parts of this section aim to provide a lens for the (in)determinate principles of Butler's weak / relational ontology, which form the backdrop for her so-called ethical and political theories.

2.3.2. The Butlerian Subject

While Butler's weak ontology envisions a very different type of subject than the sovereign or transcendental subject, her focus remains with the subject and theories of subject formation. In fact, it can be argued that most of Butler's theory spirals around her conception of subject formation (Salih, 2002:2), understood as a weak ontology. Moreover, the contestable and opaque nature of Butler's subject has also resulted in a consistent and ever-evolving theorisation of the subject. I will therefore provide a more detailed discussion of Butler's understanding of the subject thematically. My discussion of the "Butlerian subject" will be in reference to her notions of i) the subject in process; ii) the subject as discursive; iii) the subject as performative; and the iv) opaque subject.

i) The subject in process

Butler views the subject as "always involved in the endless process of becoming". This notion of the subject as always in the process of becoming is derived from Simone de Beauvoir's renowned claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1949:281). By drawing on this claim, Butler's conception of the subject as always in process was developed in *Gender Trouble*. While Butler's idea of the subject is broad in scope, it was put forth most thoroughly within her well-known sex/gender argument. This latter argument must be understood as a

criticism of the traditional liberal feminist distinction where sex is seen as a natural (biological) category, and gender a cultural category, and where one's gender (i.e., "feminine" behaviours and traits) is somehow based upon, or derived from, one's sex (i.e., a female biology). This early feminist understanding might be classified as a form of strong ontology, even though it had been developed in protest against another, older strong ontology of sexual difference.

Butler, arguing against the liberal feminist view of sex and gender, states that "perhaps this construct called 'sex' is culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" (Butler, 1999:9). What this claim quite radically implied is that gender is "unnatural", to the extent that there is no inherent correlation between your sex as female and supposedly "feminine" character traits. What Butler means by this is that the concept "sex" cannot be meaningfully separated from the discursive practice which normatively, or prescriptively, connects "feminine" or "masculine" traits to a particular sex. In other words, "biological sex", as understood by the liberal feminists, is as much of a cultural and linguistic construct as is "gender", traditionally understood. Against the liberal conception that "sex" is the natural foundation for gender, Butler invites us to consider that "sex" might be the product or result of "gender", and thus just as "unnatural" or as much cultural and discursive artifice as feminists have said of "gender". Butler advocates for a view of subject formation and identity where discourse precedes and defines the subject, including the "gendered" subject.

ii) Discursive subjects

In the discussion of her trajectory (2.2.), I noted that Butler's subject is "birthed by norms". This claim does not imply that all subjects are anonymously initiated into, or comprehensively constituted by, power. As Butler (1993:10) clarifies, to say that discourse is formative does not mean that it *causes* the subject to be, but rather "it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body". This view clearly resonates with her understanding of the subject as constantly in process, as dynamically becoming rather than as a static being, and moreover it emphasises how language actively shapes the formation and becoming of bodies. In other words, Butler's ontology of the subject does not entail either an *a priori* or a predetermined subject. Rather, it is a subject "who cannot be thought outside the norms that constitute it" (Hekman, 2014:456), and, one might add, the norms that continue daily to constitute it.

To this extent, Butler's "subject" is not strictly speaking an individual, in the sense of a fully formed "given", but instead a linguistic structure in formation. As Salih (2002:2) writes, from the beginning of Butler's theoretical endeavours, she sets out to argue that "we become subjects when we assume the sexed/gendered/'raced' identities which are constructed for us (and to a certain extent by us) within existing power structures". Thus, Butler's ontology of the subject is already hinted at in her first few publications where she sets out to argue that:

> the category of "sex" is, from the start, normative; it is what Foucault has called a "regulatory ideal." In this sense, then, "sex" not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls. (Butler, 1993:1)

By putting ontological theorists such as Hegel and Freud in conversation with the post-structuralist thought of key figures like Althusser and Foucault, Butler is able to offer an ontological account that is as much concerned with *being* as with power, and that illuminates the constitutive relation between them. Following Foucault, she emphasises that the subject is not construed purely from without, but is actively internalising, as well as sometimes resisting, the normative discourses that help to shape it. The point is not that subjects are determined by discourse, but that subjects cannot be understood outside of the dynamic discourses that shape them in an ongoing fashion. For this reason, her arguments about sexed/gendered/raced identities cannot be separated from her ontological claims. Subjectivity, for Butler, is therefore "the insistent, interpellating demand of discursive power" (White,1999:160). This means that to be a subject is to function both within and against the ongoing operations of power. The subject cannot be thought outside of the norms that constitute it.

Butler's main argument is that it is impossible to have any access to the body, to grasp, make sense of, or interpret it, except through discourse. To access the body, in this case, refers to any attempt to think of or frame the body in terms of identity. Butler (2009:1) argues that it is not possible to think of "*being*" outside of the operations of power. For Butler, even our critical position towards power cannot be conceived of outside of power, or rather outside of the discourse of power. While this point comes across as rather radical, an example might help to illuminate how such a claim is possible.

As a thought experiment, consider any aspect of embodied life. These examples could range from embodied experiences such as sexual intimacy, or physical labour, to picking up a pen, or eating an apple. If Butler's claim is taken seriously, this would mean that it is impossible to think of our own bodies, or even use our own bodies, without passing through discourse or at least through the discursive organisation of our thoughts, bodily responses or actions. Is it possible to separate the example notion of "sexual intimacy" from matters of sexual orientation, sex education, the porn industry, religion, sexual positions and gender roles? You might be able to not participate in these discursive constructs, or even consciously try to distance yourself from them, but it is impossible to isolate any understanding of sexual intimacy from its discourse.

However, as I have intimated, Butler's understanding of the subject as dynamically evolving and changing – in response to discursive and power constructs that precede it and call it into being – also initiates a certain concern with the ability for agency or self-constitution within this matrix of discourse.[26] For her, the resistance itself of the subject to the normative powers that shape it is performed inside those norms and is ultimately even made possible by them, even as the resistant or inconsistent performance may start to shift or change them. Most importantly, it is a subject whose ontology, whose *being*, is dependent on those "discursive" norms.

The concept of "performativity" provides the opening for Butler to show how the subject is both formed by discourse, and is at the same time able to have agency within the operations of discourse.

iii) The subject as performative

The notion of Butler's subject, as ontologically in process and as discursive, is moreover inextricably connected to her understanding of subjecthood as performative. Butler argues that gender is performative. What is often neglected within conversations about gender performativity is the phenomenological underpinnings of the theory. Lloyd (2007:37) writes that it is crucial to approach Butler's theory of performativity with an awareness of its existential debt to Beauvoir and existential phenomenology. This is another instance of how an existential ontology, as opposed to a metaphysical ontology (as discussed in 2.3.1.), can offer

[26] In *Giving an Account*, she explicitly struggles with the place and nature of the accountable self within such a world devoid of "sovereign subjects".

a "weak ontology" capable of addressing the discursive aspect of subject formation. In fact, the very notion of "stylised repetition of acts" is a term that Butler adopts from Beauvoir in order to form her own argument in *Gender Trouble.* Beauvoir claimed that *being* a woman is something that one "does" (through repetitive acts). Butler takes this claim a step further by emphasising that there is no "woman subject" or actor pre-existing and underlying this process of *doing* a certain action. Instead, for Butler, "performance pre-exists the performer" because there is no inherent subject doing a performance (Salih, 2002:10). You become what you are through repeatedly performing it. We could therefore reformulate Beauvoir's claim in Butlerian terms by saying *being* a woman is something that is *done to* the subject (discursively), and in the same sense it can be *undone* (by the subject). Thus, the discursive account of *being* a woman does not entail a passive subject. For Butler, the situated body or the lived body can only be mediated through historical specificity.

As the field of gender performativity developed further, there were many disputes surrounding how exactly Butler meant to employ this term of performativity. In a later attempt to clarify her project, Butler (2015:28) noted that "performativity characterises first and foremost that characteristic of linguistic utterances that in the moment of making the utterance makes something happen or brings the phenomenon into being".

This understanding of performativity is derived from language philosopher J.L. Austin's[27] classic work *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), in which he develops the idea of "speech acts". Austin puts forth that language does not only *refer* to things, but sometimes it also *enacts* them. For example, it is an enactment such as "I now pronounce you man and wife" that acts out something (being married) by merely articulating it. In this sense, the words, literally, bring action into being, and bring about something new in the world.

Butler takes over Austin's understanding, but also takes the concept of performativity further with the aim to demonstrate how these performative linguistic acts can take the form of performative *bodily* acts, not necessarily accompanied by explicit speech. By extending the focus of performativity to the realm of the body, Butler is able to ask, for example, "how [can] an individual's repetitive citation (via bodily acts) of a concept such as womanhood [*produce*] the 'material' body of a woman". In response to this, Butler explicates how gender is

[27] Butler (2015:28) claims that while Austin is primarily responsible for the term, it has also been used alternatively in the work of Derrida, Bourdieu and Sedgwick and other more traditionally analytic philosophers of language.

performative by making reference to graphic events that *inaugurate* gender- it could be as simple as yelling "it's a boy". This is for her a similar speech act to proclaiming a couple "married", with the same ontological and constitutive effect. Once again, this example illustrates how discourse and norms, working together, produce gender.

Butler (1993:2) therefore defines performativity as "not a singular or deliberate 'act', but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names". In other words, it is through the repetition of "discursive practices" that performative action takes shape. Thus, Butler's account of performativity claims that the subject does not only "bring into being what it names" but instead it refers to "that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains" (Butler, 1993:3). Moreover, it is through (the concept of) performativity as bodily, habitual actions that norms are either reiterated and enforced, or, alternatively, altered and subverted. The performative moment of bodily materialisation[28] is therefore also the moment that holds the promise of resistance to norms. Because the subject is constructed, its meaning or full presence is also always deferred and "never fully what it is in any given juncture in time". For this reason, it is also possible "to reassume or repeat subjecthood in different ways" (Salih, 2002:2).

Because discourse is ingrained within language, the point for Butler is not just that language acts, but that it acts powerfully. Meaning, language has the power to enact things (such as hatred) that can reinforce or destabilise certain power relationships. Moreover, bodies also act discursively, even when not overtly accompanied by words or speech. For example, during a silent march, the bodies, within their silence, challenge the operations of power in a very particular way. If this is the case, then Butler's notion of performativity also speaks to the ontological aspect that power relations operate in. If the subject is ontologically bound or beholden to discourse or discursive constructs,[29] and the formation of the subject is always becoming within the reiterations of certain modes of being, then performativity can be seen as a concept that is both related to ontology and ontologically relational. In other words, Butler's understanding of human existence in relation to the world and one another is, at its core, a person's relation to the discursive norms that govern him or her, while still presenting the opportunity to alter them. This is an opportunity that arises anew in each new

[28] How the body is performed, and how it appears as this or that kind of gendered body

[29] For example, from a young age, a child designated as female might be repeatedly admonished to act "more lady-like", to develop a "feminine" body composure. She is disciplined into gestures, stances, and ways of comporting her body that satisfy the unwritten codes or norms of femininity.

repetition/performance of an habitual action. In addition to this understanding of the subject as performative, Butler's relational ontology also maintains that the (discursive) subject is opaque to itself. This will be discussed in the next section.

iv) The opaque subject

Butler's alternative ontology – as a critique of the sovereign subject transparent to itself – is evident in her counter-suggestion that the subject is in fact opaque, both to itself and to others. This position puts forth that the subject is "divided, ungrounded and incoherent from the start" (Butler, 2005:19). Moreover, Butler (ibid.:20) argues that this "opacity of the subject" is an outcome of its constitutive and open-ended relationality.

To make this argument, Butler claims that we are fundamentally dependent on others (in addition to being beholden to discursive and other constitutive norms, as discussed) in order to exist. This argument finds its origin in Butler's example of giving an account of oneself to another. Butler refers to this encounter as the "scene of the address", where you are prompted to explain yourself. The main question that Butler is concerned with pertains to how it is possible to give an account of oneself, to another, when we are not transparent to ourselves. In other words, there are many instances where it becomes difficult to narrate yourself "truthfully", to give an account of your actions and motivations. This is because we are so strongly constituted by forces that lie outside of our conscious minds, including the formative relations we have with others, and by pervasive social norms and their disciplining effects. It follows that the task of narrating oneself is always prompted by an encounter with another (Mills, 2015:7). According to Butler (2005), there are two conditions that limit the subject's ability to give an account of itself within the scene of the address.

Butler draws on this idea of the opaque subject to provide a revised ontology of ethical responsibility. First, Butler (2005:20) notes that our earliest and primary relations, such as our childhood relationships, are not always available to our conscious knowledge. Yet these moments of "unknowingness" emerge in relation with and in response to others. This claim is illustrated with Laplanche's psychoanalytic account of the materialisation of infantile subjectivity. As Butler writes: "the origin of affect cannot be recovered through proper articulation, whether in narrative form or in any other medium of expression [...] no subject can narrate the story of a primary repression that constitutes the irrecoverable basis of his or her own formation" (Butler, ibid:72). Butler's reference to this primary repression can be

understood in Freudian terms as the "originating moment of repression" or the first unconscious repression that takes place before anything else can be repressed. Butler therefore draws on this idea to illustrate how the "opaque subject" is already present within the unconscious mechanism that is itself dependent on repression – to the extent that unknowingness is salient in the process of self-constitution, and a certain not-knowing lies at the basis of the emergence of subjective consciousness.

Butler's second claim is that existing social norms mystify the narrative of the subject, rendering the "singular stories" that we tell unintelligible (Butler, 2005:73). I take this claim to refer to the ways in which discourse already presents a narrative of the self, making it hard to separate perceived notions of self from its discursive constitution, and thereby obscures the possibility for completely intelligible self-narration. For example, discursive gender roles that associate femininity with domesticity might problematise my own attempt to describe myself as a woman who (innocently) enjoys domestic work.

Mills (2015:8) provides a helpful exposition of Butler's second claim related to social norms and the opaque subject. This exposition, particularly of how Butler draws on Hegel and Foucault, is three-fold: firstly, Butler argues that the terms or vocabulary that one uses to narrate oneself "precede and exceed the time of one's being", rendering the account of the self foreign to the self. Secondly, Butler argues that the social and ethical norms which dictate who will be recognisable as a subject, or an Other to the subject, further obscure the ability to recognise the borders of the self. For example, it might be that growing up in a community which denounces homosexuality might impact someone who identifies as queer to the extent that they struggle to "narrate" their sexual orientation towards others (or even themselves). The discursive social and ethical norms therefore often conflict with the stability of the perceived self.

In the third instance, Butler claims that the "normative horizon" in which one appears can change or "rupture" at any given time, "when a demand or desire for recognition is not easily accommodated within existing norms" (Mills, 2015:8). Refugee status might be an example of how this idea could play out. Once the "normative horizon" of national belonging is stripped away, it might be that misrecognition of subjecthood takes place to the extent that your (the refugee's) ability to give an account of yourself (as a citizen and more broadly) is troubled. The volatile discourse, which constantly makes and unmakes the subject, therefore confounds the

possibility to give any certain or permanent account of oneself, sustaining the opacity of the subject.

It should be noted that this ontological understanding of the subject as opaque due to its relation, or dependency, on others (and the norms which govern them) is formative for Butler's rethinking of responsibility and ethics, as theorised further in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005). Section 2.4.3. will therefore continue this discussion in order to explicate Butler's (ibid.:19) argument that "the limits of self-knowledge can serve a conception of ethics and responsibility".

To conclude, based on this section on the Butlerian subject, it can be deduced that Butler's relational ontology is deeply rooted in her particular understanding of the subject as constantly "becoming" and "in process". This process of becoming is also facilitated within the discursive operations of power, rendering subjecthood "performative". Lastly, Butler's proposition that the subject is also opaque to itself exposes the ways in which our interdependent being can offer possibilities for the concepts of opacity and responsibility to coexist. In the following, final section on Butler's relational ontology, I will elaborate more on how a social ontology accompanies Butler's relational ontology.

2.3.3. Social Ontology and the Body

According to Chambers & Carver (2008:91), Butler continually names "the primacy of relationality" within her remarks related to subjectivity and being. Thonhauser (2013:13) also points out that Butler's investigation pertaining to subject constitution relates to the social conditioning of the body. Butler's understanding of the subject as always becoming, performative and discursive, can thus be situated within a broader social ontology. Butler (2009:34) writes:

> I want to argue that if we are to make broader social and political claims about rights of protection and entitlement to persistence and flourishing, we will have to be supported by a new bodily ontology. This new bodily ontology is one that implies the rethinking of precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependency, exposure, bodily persistence, desire, work and the claims of language and social belonging.

Similarly, in *Frames of War*, Butler argues that a social ontology of the body is needed in order to make any social and political claims. There, she writes:

> It is not possible first to define the ontology of the body and then to refer to the social significations the body assumes. Rather, to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form, and that is what makes the ontology of the body a social ontology. (Butler 2009:37)

In order to qualify that the body is a social phenomenon, Butler relates this social ontology back to subject formation and agency. Butler's argument is thus that there is no body outside of, or pre-existing, this social subject formation; rather, the bodily composure, motility and behaviours are a material expression of this process. Butler therefore seems to claim that, at its core, the body (as a phenomenon) ought to be understood by its relational exposure to others (and the normative and power systems in which it is embedded).

One of the key points of departure for Butler's social ontology is the supposition that bodies are vulnerable. This argument, pertaining to dependency on the Other, stems from her formulation in *The Psychic Life* (1997:21) that the subject's existence depends on the "primary vulnerability to the Other". This (inter)dependency, as an ontological condition, can be traced back to the infant's dependence on the care of others. All subjects therefore emerge first and foremost *through* this dependency on another; bodily dependency is therefore the precondition for the relationality that shapes us into selves or subjects. For this reason, any account of the body as purely constrained by its own primary vulnerability cannot make sense, even if this is merely related to the way we are *brought* into the world. Indeed, the term "brought" into the world already suggests our emergence as dependent upon the actions of others, but this absolutely fundamental vulnerability cannot be overcome or negated or wished away – it is in itself the necessary condition for emerging as a person.

While the infant's body is subjected to dependency in terms of a need for care and nourishment, it is also exposed through its vulnerability since it is the vulnerable (i.e., sensitive, perceiving) body that "exposes us or opens us up to the other: to their gaze, their touch, their violence" (Butler 2004: 21). It is noteworthy that Butler places within the same sentence gaze (that which connects with us and calls us forth into the human community), touch (related to care work – tending to our dependency and vulnerability) and violence (when this vulnerability is either ignored or used against us) as the spectrum of relational modes to which we are exposed right from the start. But it is important that it is not straightforwardly good or bad; and it is inevitable. Thus, for Butler (2005:8), "the 'I' is always to some extent dispossessed by the social conditions of its emergence". And, moreover, the dispossessed "I" cannot be sovereign or self-transparent.

Butler is keen to show that this account of the body as being fundamentally exposed and dependent does not lead to a deterministic account of agency. Rather, she wants to highlight that it is precisely our socially and other-conditioned body that enables us to act as subjects emerging into the social world amongst others. Moreover, Butler wants to point out that it is by means of the shared circumstance of being conditioned (the generalised condition of precariousness) that we are enabled to act together (Thonhauser, 2013:13). Because of this ontological dependence on the Other, with the other side of the coin, the ability to co-constitute a shared reality, Butler's ontology of the body is also the starting point for Butler to think about responsibility (ibid.:12). This idea will be further explored in Section 2.4.3. In this way, the social ontology of the body as relational provides an opening for Butler's ethical thinking.

2.4. Butler's Relational Ethics

In this section I set out to provide an explanation of how Butler's ethics is infused with her ontology of relationality. What is clear from the previous discussion on Butler's relational ontology is that her understanding of the subject has ethical implications. This argument is based on the idea that one's ethical responsibility *for* the other always already depends on one's ontological relation *to* the other. An understanding of the subject as always inextricably connected to, and dependent upon, the other therefore *necessitates* an ethical response to the other on whom one depends, and who is dependent on oneself. This ethical relation, in turn, stems from the possibility of either responding well or responding harshly to the (dependency and vulnerability of the) other – or not even recognising the other as a subject at all. For this reason, Chambers & Carver (2008:93) argue that it is precisely Butler's ontology of the subject that gives her an opening into the realm of ethics.

I aligned myself previously (2.2.2.) with the scholars who argue that Butler's oeuvre has always been implicitly concerned with ethical questions, even when the overt focus was on ontological concerns. Simultaneously, I also recognise that there is a much clearer ethical development in Butler's post-9/11 work, known as the Butlerian turn, where a so-called explicit ethics could be traced. This distinction between Butler's explicit and implicit ethical considerations provides a helpful approach for discerning, at least methodologically, between Butler's ethics and her underlying ethical considerations that extend throughout her work.

Moya Lloyd (2015:6) offers a helpful overview of contemporary attempts by critics to frame Butler's explicit ethics. While Butler has self-described her work as an "ethic of non-violence"

(ibid.:7), her critics offer a widespread lexicon to name and describe a Butlerian ethics. Examples such as "ethics of grievability", "ethics of vulnerability", "ethics of responsibility" and "ethics of failure" speak to the distinctive, yet related, attempts to structure and depict Butler's ethics. Despite these variations in definition, a case could be made that there is a sense of thematic continuity among scholars when considering a Butlerian ethics. In this regard, Butler's theoretical vocabulary includes, but is not limited to, key concepts such as: the body and corporeal vulnerability, precariousness and precarity, grief and grievability, liveability and the liveable life, as well as violence and ethical violence (ibid.:6). These concepts will be discussed further throughout this section, with particular reference to relationality.

My exposition of the relational underpinnings in Butler's (explicit) ethics unfolds over three sections. First, I will discuss Butler's concept of the "liveable life" and its relation to the concept of "normative violence". Second, I will briefly consider Butler's notions of "grievability" and "precariousness" as ethical concepts. Third, I will situate Butler's relational ethics within her account of "responsibility" (based on Levinas's thinking).

2.4.1. Liveable Life and Normative Violence

Butler's explicit writings on ontology in *Frames of War* aim to show how *being* is based on the selective means by which some lives are deemed more liveable than others. At the core of this statement is a question regarding what counts as a liveable life and how we can discern between the liveable and the unliveable life. Simply put, Butler's notion of a "liveable life" refers to a life that is more than bearable and capable of flourishing. However, Butler thinks that certain lives are restricted to the realm of survival, rendering these lives unliveable.

Butler's ethical/political project to promote human flourishing in terms of "liveable lives" is rooted within her broader project to re-centre ethics within philosophy, and by implication in her own work as well. In the first chapter of *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler (2005:3) clarifies her ethical point of departure by considering "how it might be possible to pose the question of moral philosophy". To answer this question, Butler draws on Adorno's distinction between morality and ethics as a valuable resource. By following Adorno's suggestion that morality can be considered as related to human liveability, and ethics as the rules which govern it, Butler reaches the conclusion that "an ethical norm that fails to offer a way to live, or that turns out, within existing social conditions to be impossible to appropriate, should become

subject to critical revision" (ibid.:5-6). Here, Butler is once again distancing herself from ethical principles that operate within hypothetical scenarios as "absolutes".

As an example, consider the ethical norm that the act of marriage is the most virtuous form of monogamous relationship. While this example is often used within a religious context, the fact that the normative horizon dismisses, for example, LGBT+ persons in certain places from getting married would require "critical revision" on Butler's reasoning. On the one hand, this revision is needed on the basis of the norm's inability to be appropriated within existing social conditions (not everyone can get married), and on the other hand, Butler would also consider this to be an example of "normative violence" (which I will explicate shortly).

By demanding ethical norms that can operate within textured realities, Butler distanced herself from normative ethics,[30] while simultaneously aligning herself (albeit often critically) with the post-structuralist tradition that attempts to re-centre "questions of obligation, respect, recognition and conscience" (Lloyd, 2015:2). Key thinkers from this alternative tradition include Nietzsche, Levinas, Derrida, Habermas and Adorno.

Perhaps one of Butler's earliest ethical formulations can be captured by her insistence that attention ought to be paid to "norms that make life liveable in some bodies and unliveable in others" (Butler, 2009:108). Butler's understanding of norms, discourse and language implies that the ability for a subject to have a good life can be hindered by the ways in which language can culturally (re)produce subordination and oppression through the subject-constitutive norms that it might impose. Given the basic ontological insight that our bodies expose us to others, while simultaneously being exposed to norms (such as the heterosexual matrix), it is Butler's thesis that certain subjects are violated by such norms in ways that make life *unliveable* for them. The ethical question underlying this statement relates to how we can respond to the norms that seek to distinguish between those who enter the field of appearance as liveable (thus, capable of flourishing), and those who enter it as unliveable (thus, merely struggling to survive).

The heterosexual matrix offers a valuable example of how this field of appearance makes the distinction between liveability and unliveability. In short, the heterosexual matrix refers to "an

[30] By normative ethics, I am referring to the sub-field of ethics that is concerned with the criteria for what is "right" or "wrong", and thereby seeks to ask and respond to "ought questions". To this extent, normative ethics is often more practically inclined (Fieser, 2019).

invisible norm which does not appear to be constructed but comes through as natural" or "the compulsory practice of heterosexuality" (Butler, 1990:30;208). Specifically, the heterosexual matrix presumes everyone to be heterosexual until it is indicated otherwise. Moreover, the heterosexual matrix in a sense regards all deviance from the matrix as somehow less real, or at least unnatural – it thereby condemns non-conforming selves to non-existence. The ethical norm which prescribes heterosexual matrimony, while assuming that everyone is equally able to "publicly love" (or can legally do so), would therefore, to a large extent, be perpetuating the heterosexual matrix that renders (for example) LGBT+ lives unliveable. One could then ask, given the fact that there is no pre-social or pre-discursive body, how does it happen that certain bodies experience something like the heterosexual matrix as unliveable, and others experience it as fully liveable and embrace it? I think that Butler would maintain that the differential ways in which these discursive norms are "performative" in subtle and nuanced ways would also account for the spectrum of critical engagement with these norms. However, the overwhelming number of groups that assemble against hetero-normativity or white-normative spaces (like #BlackLivesMatter or #MeToo) to lay claim to their experience of un/liveability is an affirmation of this phenomenon.

In *Undoing Gender* (2004:17), Butler makes the case that certain sexual minorities (e.g., intersex, transgender or other gender non-conforming people) find life to be unliveable when their very basic needs are rendered as conflicting with the norms that govern them. It follows that people who are trapped within what Butler calls "the struggle with the norm", are also implicated in the question of "which lives will count properly as human and which will be discounted as something less than human" (Chambers & Carver, 2008:70). For Butler, there is thus an ethical responsibility to reinvent the norms to such an extent that non-normative bodies, those who "deviate" from the norms, are able to not only survive, but flourish. It seems then that Butler equates "living a liveable life" with agency, visibility, and being recognised as a subject. To politically demand a liveable life is therefore to demand to be recognised as someone worthy of flourishing. While Butler does not elaborate much on how these demands might practically play out, her focus seems to be on emphasising that there is an ethical call to minimise both the social and literal exposure to the denial of the subject. An example of the social denial of subjecthood could be the absence of laws that protect transgender people, or the existence of transphobic laws, whereas the literal denial of their subjecthood could be seen

in the targeting and killing of transgender people.[31] In this sense, the concept of a liveable life is preoccupied not with being physically capable of living in the rudimentary sense of the word, i.e., with brute survival, but rather with "how culturally particular norms define who is recognisable as a subject capable of living a life that counts" (Lloyd, 2015:134).

In contrast with the liveable life, Butler describes the moment when a subject is not recognised as an agent (or as worthy of a liveable life), as an act of violence. This violence is called "normative violence", referring to the violence done within the (discursive and relational) formation of subjectivity. Thus, "normative violence" is not necessarily overt physical violence, but rather a violation of the conditions for subject status, which may in turn lead to physical violence, often enacted with impunity. Chambers & Carver (2008:78) also argue that normative violence revolves not around the violence done to any pre-formed subject, but rather to the violence that transpires within the very inauguration and ongoing constitution of subjectivity. Normative violence therefore impedes persons from becoming subjects both in their own eyes, and in the eyes of others. To further substantiate this claim, Chambers & Carver (ibid.) mention that it is of utmost importance that normative violence is considered to be within the same sphere that seeks to uncover the violence of language.[32]

Butler's concept of normative violence therefore connotes a violence that is discursive. In this way, it becomes easier to imagine how normative violence can initiate or precede our typical conception of violence. An act of physical violence, for example, could be involved when heterosexual people police the lives of homosexual people, e.g., when the latter are attacked and physically assaulted. However, the concept "normative violence" acknowledges that it is due to the discourse which constructs heterosexuality as the norm, and homosexuality as a deviation from that norm, that it is possible to make sense of, for example, hate crimes against members of the LGBT+ community. Normative violence initiates and dictates other forms of violence, and often leads to physical violence. And according to my interpretation of Butler, at the same time, this normative violence can also erase the very possibility of considering, for example, homophobia as a form of violence. So, it is a double injustice – first the subject

[31] For example, the recent murders committed in Brazil, Mexico and the US that can be recognised as hate crimes against transgender people (Wareham, 2019).

[32] Chambers & Carver (2008:79) draw an interesting parallel between Butler's concept of normative violence and Derrida's paradoxical "Violence of the Letter", as they both seek to provide a counter-intuitive conception of violence as something that also transpires within language.

annihilation, then the erasure or denial of that denial or erasure. And therefore, the plight towards a "liveable life" seeks to address both of these forms of violence/denial of subjecthood.

Butler's ethical project is thus to interrogate these forms of normative violence by making them and their workings – their effects on the relative liveability of diverse lives – visible. In this case, the inverse of the doubling effect of "normative violence" also applies: by categorising homophobia as hate speech, or violence, the possibility to subvert normative violence also becomes possible. Thus, addressing normative violence can ultimately help combat/reduce overt forms of physical violence. In many ways, Butler's self-proclaimed ethics of non-violence can already be located in *Gender Trouble* as an early attempt to destabilise, and make visible, the normative violence done by the heterosexual matrix that seeks to naturalise gender.

Thus, most of the concepts that describe Butler's relational ethics relate to the project of subverting "normative violence" in order to create a "liveable life" for all. To this extent, Butler's (2005:8) ongoing commitment to ethics is well phrased in the following statement: "not only does ethics find itself embroiled in the task of social theory, but social theory, if it is to yield nonviolent results, must find a liveable place for this 'I'".

2.4.2. Ethics of Grievability, Precarity, and Precariousness

Butler's concept of normative violence becomes relevant once again in *Precarious Life* (2004), where Butler provides a reading of the events of 9/11 using the lens of normative violence. These events served as an opportunity for Butler to provide a broader theoretical conception of violence. This is especially significant in her understanding of grievability and the grievable life. Earlier, I mentioned that normative violence can in certain cases result in the inability to perceive or acknowledge some forms of violent acts as violence. A recent example comes to mind. On 3 January 2020, Donald Trump decided to assassinate Iran's general Qasem Soleimani with the argument that it would help to deter future attacks against the U.S. For many people, including Donald Trump, this killing is not considered an act of violence. Besides Qasem Soleimani, four other members of the Iranian army were also killed. Contrary to the view of Trump, for many Iranians these killings were acts of violence, of severe dehumanisation, and the inability to see them as such doubled the injustice. In Iran, these feelings led to a collective response of mourning and grief. They were lives lost. Lives worth grieving.

As Ruti (2017:97) points out, Butler "deftly demonstrates [that] one of the ruses of power is to delimit the domain of grievability so that – under normal circumstances – we are prevented from mourning the suffering (or death) of those deemed different from, or inferior to ourselves". For Butler, "grievability" is not only something that marks the value of life, it also refers to the normative differentiation between "grievable" and "un-grievable" lives. "Grievability" thus closely traces her earlier mentioned notion of the liveability of a life, its perceived value, its possibilities for flourishing, and the normative violence operating in the background to render lives either liveable (socially valued) or unliveable (not socially valued) – and, often correlating with this basic division, to render liveable lives grievable and unliveable lives ungrievable.

Like "liveability", "grievability" is also, according to Butler, differentially distributed across populations. Butler's discussion of the "differential allocation of grief" (Butler, 2009:37) is centred, as in *The Psychic Life of Power*, on the problematic of public mourning: only certain lives are openly grieved, whereas others are not. These ideas were specifically in reference to the outpouring of grief for the US victims of 9/11 (detailing their lives, up to their last minutes) in contrast with the thousands of anonymous deaths (murders) of Afghani citizens at the hands of the US military, in retaliation for 9/11. For Butler, the regulation of the practices and rituals of public mourning has to do with the question of who can appear in the public sphere; whose lives are recognised as lives, and whose deaths are counted as deaths. To put it differently: the practices of public mourning reflect the norms that govern the recognisability of lives as liveable.

Two other related concepts central to Butler's ethical project are her notions of "precarity" and "precariousness". The distinction between these two concepts is pivotal towards making sense of Butler's contemporary thought. I introduce these two concepts in relation to Butler's relational ethics as they interrelate with the operations of unliveability and grievability.

First, I discuss "precariousness". Based on the ontological dependency that "brings the subject into being", there is also a certain vulnerability to each other. Butler employs the concepts of "precariousness" to describe/flesh out the universal condition of human life that renders us vulnerable. In this sense, "precariousness" refers to "the corporeal vulnerability shared by all mortals, including the privileged" (Watson, 2012:34). Butler writes:

> Precariousness has to be grasped not simply as a feature of *this* or *that* life, but as a generalized condition whose very generality can be denied only by denying precariousness itself... The injunction to think precariousness in terms of equality ... emerges precisely from the irrefutable generalizability of this condition. (Butler, 2009: 22)

Butler is therefore insisting that irrespective of how we operate within the normative matrix, or perhaps by virtue of it, everyone shares an undeniable sense of "precariousness" which renders us inherently vulnerable (materially exposed to others) at any given time. It is important to also emphasise here that Butler considers "precariousness" as a universal condition of human life, while she also maintains that it is experienced in highly singular or differential ways. Thus, everyone is generally exposed to sudden death or the threat of violence, but it is also the case that (based on the effects of normative violence for example) some are more exposed than others.

To account for this differential allocation of our generalised "precariousness", Butler introduces the concept of "precarity". "Precarity" can be interpreted as a particular feature of those who are deemed disposable or, in Butlerian terms, denied subjecthood (Watson, 2012:34). Those who have, in Butlerian terms, less grievability, or experience life as unliveable, are therefore exposed to heightened "precariousness" and are therefore deemed "precarious". These concepts form part of a Butlerian ethics to the extent that her ethical project is to minimise differentially induced precarity. In the next chapter, I will elaborate on how Butler employs this concept of "induced precarity", which is distinct from the precariousness which characterises the human condition as such, alongside her notion of "performativity" within the context of public assembly.

Given the construction of Butler's "ethics of grievability, liveability and precarity" that was discussed in this section, how can we conceive of ethical responsibility as a possibility to undo "normative violence"? In the next section, I will discuss how Butler considers the concept of "responsibility" via her reading of Emmanuel Levinas.

2.4.3. Levinas and Responsibility for the Other

Butler's relational ethics can perhaps be located most explicitly in her readings of Levinas regarding responsibility for the Other[33]. Throughout Butler's trajectory, she employed Levinas

[33] Capitalisation of Other as used in Levinasian philosophy.

on various occasions in order to consider responsibility and the possibility to address, or be addressed by, the Other. In this section I will explicate the main components of a Levinasian ethics, and also illustrate how Butler critically develops his thinking to formulate her own notion of ethical responsibility to the Other.

Levinas, a prominent French-Jewish philosopher, argues that ethics is initiated by "the face" of an Other person. Beyond the literal face of an Other that physically appears before you, Levinas refers to "the face" of the Other in reference to "precisely the noteworthy fact that the other – not only in fact, but in principle – does not coincide with [her] appearance, image, photograph, representation, or evocation" (Burggraeve, 1999:29). When turned towards us, the face in this sense therefore escapes our gaze, because it can never be fully objectified. Moreover, the face that presents itself, while escaping our gaze, is vulnerable. The inclination to grasp "the face" of the other, is therefore also indicative of an attempt to exert control over her/him.

For Levinas, responsibility for the Other is stirred insofar as the "I" is accused and taken hostage by the Other. This seemingly negative metaphor by Levinas is based on his idea that responsibility is a-symmetrically "demanded by the Other" (Popuri, 2014:19). Burggraeve (1999:31) describes the ethical moment arising in this instant as follows:

> At the moment in which I am attracted by the naked "countenance" of the other to reduce him to that countenance, I simultaneously realize that that which can be actually must not. This is the core of the fundamental ethical experience beginning from the face — namely, the prohibition against committing the other solely to his own countenance. (Levinas expresses this as a categorical imperative emanating from the face: "Thou shall not kill." In my self-sufficient effort of existing, which on the ground of perception and representation aims to become the expression and realization of individual freedom, I am not merely limited from the outside but at my deepest—in the very principle of my freedom—shocked and placed in question: "Do I not kill by being?"

In the instant of being impinged upon by the face of the Other, the ethical question therefore emerges in recognising the possibility of "killing" the Other, which here also means the temptation to reduce the Other to my sameness. To this extent, the face of the Other has an authority over me (to the extent that they impinge upon me and demand ethical consideration), while she/he is simultaneously making an appeal to me (do not kill me). Therefore,

responsibility for Levinas is not to kill the Other for his Otherness,[34] but instead to "do justice to him in his otherness" (ibid.:32).

Drawing on this formulation, Butler (2015:138) asks us to recognise that our inevitable and continuous exposure to otherness – an exposure that can easily be exploited – is something we share with others, and that this shared vulnerability renders us ethically responsible for these others. That is, Butler accepts Levinas's conclusion that "our ontological condition of being bound to the other, and particularly our condition of being 'interrupted' by someone else's longing and suffering, gives rise to the kind of accountability that cannot, under any circumstances, be conjured away" (Ruti, 2017:94). Butler's insistence on the opacity of the self and the other therefore resonates well with Levinas, who says that knowledge of the other cannot by any means precede an ethical responsibility to the other, who remains forever unknowable. As theorised in *Totality and Infinity* (1961), Levinas argues that ethics is always the "first philosophy" which precedes all other considerations, and therefore ethics cannot be based upon knowledge/epistemology/ontology.

In *Precarious Life* (2004), Butler draws on Levinas to unpack the ethical predicament of the US in light of the "war on terror" post-9/11. Specifically, the ethical quandary is related to the instance where the face of the Other is made invisible, or refused, within the realm of appearance, and thus divested of an ethical response. Thus, if the face of the Other is purposefully erased, and kept outside of the sphere of public representation, a dire need for an ethics that can account for the limits of its appearance emerges. In this case, Butler explicitly links Levinas's "killing" (or refusal) of the face of the Other to the US's rendering of other civilians as ungrievable.

Moreover, through a critical reading of Levinas's notion of "the face", Butler (2004:138) is able to argue that the address of the Other precedes any possibility of language of the self. Meaning, it is only on the condition of being addressed by an Other that it is possible for the self to speak. This insight captures her understanding of the extent to which the subject is beholden for its existence to both discourse and others. For Levinas, "responsibility emerges as a consequence of being subject to the unwilled address of the Other" (Butler, 2005:138).

[34] This seems to amount to a kind of reduction of the other to their unique bodily shape, to an image or picture of a person, which would entail an erasure of the "face". If so, perhaps this kind of violation, this type of "killing" can be read as closely related to Butler's concept of normative violence. However, one distinction might be that "normative violence" is more discursive, whereas Levinas's concept of responsibility is more asymmetrical.

Thus, as persons, we are first called into personhood by the voice and words ("address") of others, and as responsible persons we come into being in the moment when we are addressed by the Other, and called upon to respond. This idea is echoed in Butler's notion that we are "brought" or "called" into the social world by the address of the Other. Because of this address of the Other, ethics cannot be an individual project. Levinas thus provides a point of departure for Butler to add that "more generally, discourse makes an ethical claim upon us precisely because, prior to speaking, something is spoken to us" (Butler, 2005:138). In this way, Levinas would say that the silent face already emits a call or address, strongly resonating with Butler's idea that the performative body participates in the discursive field.

Therefore, what this discussion on Butler's ethics of responsibility exposes is that her ethics, based on her ontology of the subject, is intended as a call to minimise the "precarity" and "unliveability" of others with whom we are in a relation. For this reason, ethics, or the ethical encounter, cannot be separated from the politics of power relations that seek to differentially distribute modes of precarity.

In this overarching section on Butler's ethics, I demonstrated how Butler's (explicit) ethical project developed as a counter to normative ethics which presumes sovereign subjectivity. The "Butlerian turn" to ethics can therefore be read as an attempt to re-centre ethics *relationally*. This relationality is apparent within Butler's lexicon of "un/grievability", "un/liveability", "precariousness", "precarity", "vulnerability" and "responsibility". Admittedly, this introductory exposition of Butler's relational ethics also generates some critical questions on a practical level. For example, what would this responsibility entail in practice? While I will not attempt to introduce or answer these questions at this stage of my thesis, they will be introduced and engaged with in subsequent chapters. In the next section I will position Butler's theoretical endeavours discussed thus far within the sphere of politics.

2.5. Butler's Relational Politics

Following the works produced within Butler's post-9/11 writings, or "second phase", growing scholarly attention has been afforded towards appropriating Butler as a *political* philosopher (Schippers, 2014:6). Usually, it is thought that philosophers who present a political theory offer some kind of diagnosis as well as a proposed solution for how political action can and ought to take place. Given Butler's theoretical points of departure, however, it comes as no surprise that there is no easy "how to" to be uncovered in Butler's political thinking.

In this regard, when asked in a 1999 interview, Butler, like Foucault before her, felt she should refuse the demand to "be political", where being political means offering some guidelines for action. The following passage encapsulates Butler's aversion to providing a political theory:

> When theory starts becoming programmatic, such as ''here are my five prescriptions'', and I set up my typology, and my final chapter is called ''What is to be Done?'', it preempts the whole problem of context and contingency, and I do think that political decisions are made in that lived moment and they can't be predicted from the level of theory – they can be sketched, they can be schematized, they can be prepared for, but not predetermined. (Butler in Bell, 199:1999).

Perhaps what this early formulation regarding the possibilities of what thinking politically signals, is another emphasis on the process of becoming. Similarly, to the Butlerian subject, politics is also continually shaped and reshaped within certain discursive practices and material, embodied contexts. However, politics enacted in the "lived moment" is still dependent on a certain level of "liveability". In other words, to be able to participate in public assembly, one has to be recognised as a participant capable of making political claims. And thus, it is necessary to consider how political agency is made possible for the "precarious" or "those who struggle with the norm" to combat the conditions of "precarity" and "unliveability".

In this sense, Rushing (2010:300) optimistically points out that Butler's ethical dispositions prepare us for a radically different kind of politics. Indeed, Butler offers more of a contribution to politics than a concrete or universal theory of politics, given her resistance to provide a specific "how to". Butler's political thinking is therefore geared towards offering a critical alternative towards how we theorise politics. Perhaps in retrospect, Nussbaum's (1999) famed criticism against Butler as engaging in "obtuse, inaccessible, and politically paralysing theorizing" does not quite hold up. Beyond the far-reaching contemporary political topics that Butler theorises from (or within), she has also proven to be a prominent figure within public political discourse outside of academia.

As mentioned in Chapter One of this study, I read Butler as a political philosopher with a view to analyse the problem of allyship. Because Chapters Three and Four will focus more exclusively on Butler's contemporary political contributions, this section aims to merely introduce how Butler's concepts discussed thus far can be situated within the field of politics. In order to achieve this, I will first discuss Butler's constructivist account of political agency

(2.5.1.); thereafter I will present some ideas on Butler's politics of subversion (2.5.2.) that will be used to frame Butler's larger political project.

2.5.1. Butler's constructivist account of political agency

Because political action will be a central aspect of the analysis of allyship, I would like to explore how a relational account of action follows from Butler's (non-sovereign/constructivist) notion of agency. The question I want to pose concerning Butler's work with regards to her political thought can be formulated as follows: Given the relational understanding of the discursive subject, and the ethical responsibilities that stem from this understanding of the subject, how should one subsequently conceive of transformative political action?

While it may be relatively straightforward to envision how Butler's relational ontology and ethics are interrelated in the realm of politics, it might become a challenge to conceive of how political action is possible, given Butler's understanding of the subject as opaque. To this extent, the following questions come to mind: What would this responsibility entail in practice? And how are we supposed to recognise the precarity of others when encountering them? How am I supposed to "know" that someone is engaged in a struggle with the heterosexual matrix and that this renders them precarious? Isn't a pretence to such knowledge endangering my ethical responsibility? Moreover, isn't such a task rendered difficult/impossible by the opacity that necessarily accompanies all selves, all others, and all relations? How do I take responsibility in the midst of my not-knowing? Also, what will it take to minimise another's precarity even as I attempt to assist or support them? Where do I start to intervene in their struggle/battle with the norm? Do these questions imply that an ethical responsibility necessarily translates into a political responsibility?

Indeed, even sympathetic readers of Butler seem to struggle with the possibility for agency within her constructivist framework. As many critics have pointed out, it can easily seem as though the way in which this ontology governs the subject's relation to norms is a deterministic ontology of sorts. In response, the following comment was raised by Butler to address the suspicion regarding political agency in the broader post-structuralist tradition:

> If you saw me on such a protest line, would you wonder how a postmodernist was able to muster the necessary 'agency' to get there today? I doubt it. You would assume that I had walked or taken the subway! (Butler, 2003:34)

This – admittedly witty – response by Butler speaks to the common perception that her account of agency is deterministic. Butler's account of agency instead lies "at the juncture where discourse is renewed" (Butler,1995:135), and the subject is open to formations of subjecthood that are not fully constrained in advance. In what follows I will attempt to demonstrate that Butler is able to offer an account of agency free from determinism or voluntarism. I will draw on Thonhauser (2013) to formulate this account.

It has been established throughout this study thus far that Butler's post-foundational account of the subject and its agency is neither epistemological nor metaphysical. Meaning, there is no pre-given subject or agent prior to the operations of (primarily discursive) power. According to Butler (1995:46), any account of agency that relies on a pre-given subject neglects to concede "that agency is always and only a political prerogative". Of course, this idea is also a reiteration of her insight into the operations of "normative violence" that promote "unliveability" and induce "precarity". Those who are deemed "precarious" emphasise the political dimensions of agency, insofar as they expose the differential ways the ability to "act" politically is regulated discursively. This means, as Thonhauser (2013:4) describes, "agency does not exist prior to politics; rather we have to investigate the conditions of its possibility within the political process itself". To theorise "the political", or politics, is therefore also to consider the (normative) conditions for agency, rather than the notion of agency in itself.

This position is well-captured in *The Psychic Life of Power*, where Butler writes that "the subject is itself a site of this ambivalence in which the subject emerges both as the effect of a prior power and the possibility for a radically conditioned form of agency" (Butler, 1997:14). This prior power (discourse) is therefore not deterministic, but rather opens up the opportunity to rethink agency in this ambivalent way. It seems, for Butler, that agency can be located within the rupture that forms between "the enabling power" and the "enacted power" (Thiem, 2009:123). Let me attempt to simplify this statement. While the subject is constituted, or enabled, through power (norms embedded in language and institutions and in the lives of constitutive others), as we have seen throughout, this power is not itself a determining force. Rather, it is precisely and only through the reiterated acting out of its normative dictates by individual persons that this type of power persists. Moreover, this reiterated acting or "enacted power" is unstable. The "enacted power" is unstable precisely because the reiteration of acts can alter its force in unpredictable ways; for example, a certain performance according to a normative script might for some reason flip over into a parody of the same. So, somewhere

between the process of being enabled to act through power and enacting that very power (its materialisation), is also the possibility for the thus constituted subject to alter it. This possibility for (repeated) alteration is what Butler would call "agency".

To describe how such an account of agency and norms eludes determinism, Butler draws strongly on Derrida's notion of "iterability". In this sense, "iterability" refers to the regularised repetition of norms. As Thonhauser (2013:6) clarifies, this iterability implies alterability, and this opens up the possibility for agency – where the agency of the subject "is [nevertheless] bound to the conditions of its emergence". The freedom to defy pre-existing norms is therefore never absolute. This freedom is never fully present, nor fully absent. The actor remains tied through its initial constitution to the normative framework that called it into being. However, these ties are, for Butler, by no means deterministic – as and when the actor repeats/reiterates them, s/he changes, shifts and challenges them, too, almost inevitably. To this extent, Butler's understanding of agency can be situated within what could be called a "subversive politics", which will be discussed next.

2.5.2. The politics of subversion

Chambers & Carver (2008:140) describe Butler's account of political agency with the term "subversive politics". According to them, while many scholars consider the possibilities for subversive agency, not enough attention is paid to the interrogation of "subversion" as a concept. To this extent, Chambers & Carver (ibid.:140) provide a very helpful genealogical account of subversion where they argue that Butler's use of the term does not only refer to "overthrowing, overturning or upsetting". Instead, they advocate for a thinking of subversion as perhaps a more modest, or tentative, "internal erosion".

Butler's account of the politics of subversion as "internal erosion" manifests within her assertion that subversion must come from *within* culture, history and discourse if it is to be politically effective. According to Butler, it is impossible to escape the system that you wish to subvert. This political approach is articulated in the following passage:

> Subversion must be a political project of erosion, one that works on norms from the inside, breaking them down not through external challenge but through an internal repetition that weakens them. A subversive politics thus becomes a subtle politics, one that requires patient, repeated, local action. (Butler, 1993:142)

The politics of subversion, in accordance with its post-foundational roots, is thus proposed as an incalculable effect of elusive action that seeks to undermine the very distinction between inner and outer. In other words, by "weakening" norms from the inside, the outside is also altered. And more so, what was thought to be a clear distinction between inner and outer will become blurred, or abjected. Therefore, Butler's political project is not to overthrow existing identities or political systems, and to then replace them with ready-made "new" ones. Instead, Butler *is* interested in subverting the presumed coherence of identity and political modes of being. As Chambers & Carver (2008:157) note, Butler's "painstaking unfolding of subversion" can be framed as a political response to "the norm" that is lacking in both political theory and politics. As political theorists, Chambers and Carver therefore identified a lack of critique regarding matters such as "normative violence" within politics. For this reason, they suggest that the discourse of political theory cannot afford to ignore Butler's contributions.

By framing Butler's political contribution as a "politics of subversion", it becomes possible to envision how the key terms discussed in the sections on Butler's ontology (2.3.) and ethics (2.4.) can be appropriated, or even mobilised, to further these political ruptures from within. As Lloyd (2017:108) noted, Butler's relational thinking becomes political as Butler questions how "the constitutive conditions of subjectivity would enable subjects to contest both injury and degradation". More so, it is Butler's hope that the communal contestation of injury would lead to greater "liveability".

2.6. Conclusion

My intention with this chapter was to explicate what Butler's relational thinking entails. By providing a broad overview of her oeuvre and theoretical trajectory, I argued that Butler's particular understanding of relationality can be located within her interrelated ontological, ethical and political writings. In the beginning of this chapter, I referenced the metaphor of the Möbius strip as a helpful tool to make sense of how Butler's relational thinking operates. Having provided a more in-depth exposition of the ways in which Butler's key terms are employed, I established that the realms of ethics, politics and ontology cannot be read as isolated instances of Butler's relational thinking. To show this, I focused on these three categories respectively.

In my explication of Butler's relational ontology, I demonstrated that Butler's ontology can be read as an "alternative ontology" or "weak ontology", in contrast to a "strong ontology" which

depends on the foundation of a sovereign subject. To this extent, I argued that Butler offers a post-foundational theoretical position of the subject as i) in process, ii) discursive, iii) performative, and iv) opaque. This alternative representation of the subject can therefore be helpful in attempts to destabilise individualised thought, and to offer relational alternatives. To this extent, I concluded that Butler's relational ontology is also a social ontology that centres embodied ways of *being*.

Based on this conclusion, it was also shown that Butler's relational ontology prepares us for a different kind of ethics. To better frame Butler's relational ethics and her broader ethical lexicon, I explicated her core concepts, such as "liveable life", "normative violence", "grievability", "precarity", "precariousness" and "responsibility". This discussion also illustrated that Butler's ethical thinking prepares us for "a different kind of politics" that aims to reduce precarity and promote increased liveability to all.

Building on Butler's ethical conclusions, my discussion surrounding Butler's "politics" or political thinking emphasised the growing scholarly tendency to position Butler as a political thinker. As such, I elaborated on what frames Butler's constructive account of politics, and how political agency functions, based on her alternative ontology. I also underscored that Butler's political thinking can be framed as "a politics of subversion". This section therefore framed Butler's political enquiry, whereas the next chapter will elaborate more extensively on Butler's "political philosophy", as worked out in relation to public assembly and protest.

CHAPTER THREE: BUTLER'S *NOTES* ON PUBLIC ASSEMBLY AND ALLIANCES

3.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I clarified *what* constitutes Butler's relational thinking. This chapter aims to pave the way towards considering *how* Butler's relational thinking can be traced within her thoughts on public assembly and alliances. More specifically, I am interested in Butler's relational thinking in the political realm – which could perhaps be located most lucidly in her book *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015).[35] From a methodological point of view, this chapter will take the form of a thematic exploration of *Notes*. This chapter therefore seeks to establish some of the specific theoretical insights from this text, and to distil some of the themes that will foreground the analysis of allyship that will take place in Chapter Four of this study.

Before moving on to elaborate on the content of *Notes*, I will briefly clarify how I aim to engage with this text as a resource. Besides its sharp focus on alliances, the reason why *Notes* is of key relevance for this study on allyship is precisely because it highlights the interconnectedness of the ontological, political and ethical within contemporary social justice movements. Even though, as I have said, Butler does not explicitly elaborate on the performative nature of the allied body, social justice allies, or the concept of allyship within *Notes,* I aim to show that her notions of "bodies in alliance", "precarity", "performativity", "vulnerability", "interdependency" and "responsibility" can all aid in making sense of precisely these notions, as I will explicate in Chapter Four.

In the first chapter, I also made the distinction between "bodies in alliance", "allyship", and the "allied body", and I will highlight it once more due to its significance. Butler (2015:66) explicitly uses the phrase "bodies in alliance" when talking about public assembly. Additionally, Butler's discussion on public assembly seems to gravitate towards examples of when the precarious assemble against conditions of precarity. In fact, she sees the theme of bodily precarity as running through many of the public protest assemblies we currently witness. As I will show, Butler's notion of alliance can also be distinguished from other forms of communitarian political action, to the extent that alliances refer to the gathering of "precarious"

[35] Henceforth referred to as *Notes*.

groups and individuals whom are often anonymous or might otherwise have little in common.[36] In fact, an important reason for their coming together in plural performativity is precisely in order to break down and performatively resist the increasing "responsibilisation" and individualisation enforced onto citizens in the name of neoliberal and market logics. By physically appearing together and acting in concert, protesters perform at once the universality of our shared bodily precarity (and thus our shared mutual interdependency, our constitutive relationality) and this precarity's differentiated distribution. With this relational underpinning in mind, Butler's ideas on alliances are also often centred on quite radical examples[37] of public assembly and protest action.

Whereas acts of "allyship", as per the popular discourse, are inherently dependent on the logic of a positionality that entail normative or privileged bodies, Butler's notion of "bodies in alliance" suggests a broader spectrum (and preferably a plurality) of subjects that wish to combat forms of induced precarity. Thus, what I argue is not necessarily that Butler's thinking correlates with or conforms to any existing notions or characteristics that pertain to "allyship" (as discussed in Chapter One), but rather that her insights might be helpful in "subverting" what it means to be in alliance with other bodies, and take our thinking about allyship into new territory. To reiterate, this point is significant as it seeks to address my research question, namely, whether Butler's relational thinking could contribute to a more nuanced and intricate understanding of allyship than ordinarily held.

The aspects of *Notes* that I have identified as theoretically fruitful for revisiting the concept of allyship in the next chapter can be organised into three broad themes, namely: Butler's politics of precarity and vulnerability; ontology of alliances; and ethics of cohabitation. In this chapter I will firstly discuss the politics of precarity and vulnerability (3.2.), with the aim to illustrate how the concepts of "performativity" and "precarity" become mutually interrelated in the political realm. Up until this point, my established pattern was to discuss ontology as a first point of departure, however, I discuss politics first in this chapter as I consider it to be an extension of Butler's performative politics (or the third phase in her trajectory) that was discussed in section 2.5., as I will indicate below. This section will also explicate how the

[36] This idea of alliances as something that transpires between anonymous groups in often unknown ways will be discussed further in section 3.3.2.
[37] These "radical" examples of public assembly also stem from the fact that Butler is attempting to dismantle the "liberal" notion of plurality as still largely individualised multiplicity.

concept of "vulnerability" can initiate the forming of alliances, in addition to also being mobilised within alliances. In the next section, ontology of alliances (3.3.), the internal dimensions of alliances will be explored from a relational perspective. Specifically, this section will address how Butler thinks about alliances, and how she describes the act of forming alliances as always being uneasy and unpredictable. Lastly, in ethics of cohabitation (3.4.), I will demonstrate how ethics can be thought of in relation to these performances characterised by unchosen and uneasy alliances, with specific reference to the way in which Butler employs her political and ethical precursors such as Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas. Following on from this discussion, I will also demonstrate why a relational ethics of cohabitation should be considered.

3.2. Politics of Precarity and Vulnerability

In Chapter Two, I briefly introduced the concepts of "precarity", "precariousness" and "performativity" as some of Butler's most central concepts, especially as they developed in earlier texts such as *Gender Trouble (1990)*, *Precarious Life (2004)* and *Frames of War (2009)*. I also mentioned that Butler can be considered as a political thinker to the extent that she offers a subversive approach to politics, where relationality underpins questions of political action and agency. In this section, I consider the ways in which Butler combines the theoretical frameworks of "performativity" and "precarity" to extend her political project and how it underpins a key aspect of her political thinking. In the first section (3.2.1.) I will discuss how Butler brings together the concepts of "performativity" and "precarity" within the political. By making explicit the central connection between these two terms, it will be demonstrated that Butler's recent work moves from understanding "precarity" and "performativity" within the broader sense of norms, gender and acts of war, to an account that provides a footing for what could be considered a concrete coalitional politics or resistance. In the second section (3.2.2.) I will elaborate on Butler's attempt to rethink the concept of "vulnerability" as a helpful relational concept to "mobilise" for modes of resistance.

3.2.1. Precarity, Performativity and Politics

In what follows, I will briefly revisit both the initial[38] and broader (ontological and ethical) meanings of the terms "performativity" and "precarity" respectively. Thereafter I will focus on

[38] As theorised earlier in Butler's oeuvre.

the numerous ways in which the terms "performativity" and "precarity" become entangled with one another to form a vital part of Butler's contemporary, more explicitly *political*, thinking.

In a lecture given at the Complutense University of Madrid titled "Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics" (2009), Butler gives an account of how her work developed away from focusing exclusively on the concept of "performativity" towards a broader emphasis on the concept of "precarity" – as employed primarily in her post-9/11 work. In this particular lecture, Butler (ibid.:i) also offered a helpful distinction between the two terms when she noted that "performativity was 'an account of agency'", whereas "precarity describes the uncontrollable conditions that threaten one's capacity to live". I wish to elaborate on this distinction.

While it is certainly the case that the term "performativity" seeks to provide an account of subject formation and agency, particularly in relation to gender identity (as we have seen in Chapter Two), both Butler and Butlerian scholars concur that the term has a much broader reach. In this sense, the focus on agency and subject formation implicated in the term "performativity" is as applicable within the context of political action more broadly conceived as it is in the context of gender.

In Chapter Two, I discussed the concept of "performativity" as part of explicating the Butlerian subject. As noted in section 2.3.2., "performativity" can be understood as the discursive repetition of acts that is enacted upon the subject, thereby shaping its subjecthood, even before the subject is able to act or speak. In this way, the reproduction of gender, for example, is always entangled within a "negotiation with power" (ibid.). To "reproduce" gender is a negotiation with social, normative and discursive power, to the extent that altering its discursive formation can only transpire within the realms of its pre-existing and pre-ordering discourse. It follows that gender cannot be understood outside of the discourse which precedes it and to a large extent brings it into existence. Simultaneously, the constant process of "doing and undoing" gender opens up new possibilities for subverting norms by performing differently. But gender is only one example – it is true of the subject more generally that it is largely formed by the preceding dominant discursive constellations that precede it and act upon it, and call it into being through interpellation. At the same time, however, precisely because these

constellations survive through bodily enactment or performance, the subject also has the possibility to subvert them by performing (speaking and acting[39]) differently.

In making clear Butler's terms of political analysis, Chambers & Carver (2008) provide a helpful theoretical perspective on Butler's initial writings on "performativity". Chambers & Carver (ibid.:37) point out that by choosing to demonstrate how "performativity" (and by implication power) operates through the concept of "woman", Butler was already implicitly signalling the political possibilities for the concept of "performativity". For this reason, they asserted that Butler was theorising "not in application to politics, but out of the politics itself with which she engages" (ibid.:37).[40] It can perhaps be postulated that, at the time, Butler's account of gender identity was also a performative attempt to subvert, or quite literally rewrite, the norms which governed her own identity, alongside the discourse within which she wrote. As such, I contend that the theory of gender performativity is at once personal, political and a politics.

In Butler's conversation with Athanasiou, captured in the book *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (2013), Butler offered a revised version of her own definition of the term "performativity" as "a differential and differentiating process of materializing and mattering, which remains uninsured and unanticipated, persistently and interminably susceptible to the spectral forces of events" (ibid.:140). This renewed definition – which includes the differential allocation of subjectivity[41] – reiterates not only the unpredictable and ongoing process of (un)becoming a subject, but also the fact that the process of becoming is differentially allocated. This serves as a powerful reminder that even the concept of "performativity" cannot be isolated or restricted to a conversation about "gender performativity", without also considering the intersecting and differential materialities of race, being differently abled, queer, poor or stateless, and how these impact upon one's ability to "perform" your identity.

While the term "performativity" is employed to theorise modes of human subjectivity and agency, the term "precarity" concretely exposes the differential process of "materializing and

[39] A more nuanced discussion will take place within Chapter Four regarding the relationship and distinction between speaking and acting.
[40] Again we see that even though the ontological dimension was most prominent in the early stages, the ethical and especially the political, in the broad sense of concern with power, was never fully absent in her thinking.
[41] The "differential allocation of subjectivity" in this context refers to the varying degrees in which some ways of being are discursively recognised more or less than others.

mattering" in subject formation, and thus of recognition and capacities for action, including "appearing" publically as a subject, a citizen, and so on. In texts such as *Frames of War* and *Precarious Life*, Butler used the term "precarity" alongside her notions of "grievability", "normative violence" and the "liveable life" (as mentioned in section 2.4.) in order to show that some subjects are systematically or enduringly more exposed to harm than others. "Precarity" is described as the "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death" (Butler, 2015: 33).

Moreover, "precarity" can be seen as an overarching term that encompasses the "differential distribution of precariousness" (ibid.). As Butler (2010:25) also clarifies, while "precariousness" is shared by all, "precarity" is distributed unequally. In this sense, "precariousness" refers to "the corporeal vulnerability shared by all mortals, including the privileged", whereas "precarity" could be interpreted as a particular feature of those who are deemed disposable or, in Butlerian terms, denied subjecthood (Watson, 2012:35). It is for this reason that Butler (2015:58) labels "precarity" as "the middle term" (as in mediating) or the "rubric that brings together" different minorities. Indeed, "precarity" describes exactly the lives of those whose "proper place is non-being" (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013:19).

A recurring theme in Butler's political thinking relates to the notion of "recognisability". It is Butler's observation that there are certain (sexual and gender, but also other) discursive norms that determine who will be intelligible, and thus recognised, as a subject (in politics, on the street, or before the law). It is thus due to the lack of recognition when a subject appears that "precarity" becomes linked with (gender and other similar) norms. In other words, those who do not "perform" according to the norms are at risk of (normative) violence[42] in response. For Butler, the ability to qualify as a subject of recognition is thus explicitly connected to the operations of norms and power relations. In the interests of power and domination, the discursive matrix of recognisability is differentially allocated. The following extract provides a helpful example of the kind of subjects that fall victim to induced states of "precarity". Butler identifies these groups by asking:

[42] As discussed in section 2.4.1., Butler's concept of "normative violence" speaks to a kind of violence that is done within the formation of subjectivity, where the subject is not recognised as worthy of a "liveable life". As opposed to overt physical violence, normative violence is discursive.

> Who will be criminalized on the basis of public appearance; who will fail to be protected by the law or, more specifically, the police, on the street, or on the job, or in the home. Who will be stigmatized; who will be the object of fascination and consumer pleasure? Who will have medical benefits before the law? Whose intimate and kinship relations will, in fact, be recognized before the law? We know these questions from transgender activism, from feminism, from queer kinship politics, and also from the gay marriage movement and the issues raised by sex workers for public safety and economic enfranchisement. So these norms are not only instances of power; and they do not only reflect broader relations of power; they are one way that power operates. (Butler, 2009:2)

It is precisely this connection, between induced precarity and the question of who counts as a recognisable subject, that opens the window for Butler to consider "performativity" and "precarity" as interrelated concepts. In other words, "precarity" and "performativity" become connected with one another when Butler (ibid.:3) argues that norms and power relations organise and differentiate between those who can and those who cannot appear as recognisable subjects, and organise and differentiate in ways that render the latter susceptible to injury and neglect. One could say "precarity", or a disproportional exposure to violence and injury, accompanies the failure to publicly perform the "proper" kind of subjecthood. Public assembly becomes linked with "performativity" and "precarity" because those who assemble perform differently, thereby challenging the norms that shape subjecthood. The process of questioning how norms are installed and normalised is a significant step towards "ask[ing] how [they have] been installed and enacted, and at whose expense" (Butler, 2015:36). Public assembly therefore signifies a critical approach to "struggle with the norms" in an attempt to embody (perform, and thus render conceivable) a more "liveable life" (Butler, 2015:37).[43] Of course, this is particularly the case when the precarious assemble, and there may be other forms of assembly that do not contest dominant norms, but nevertheless, I would concur with Butler that all assemblies are a distinct kind of performance that (knowingly and/or unknowingly) operate discursively to either contest or promote certain norms.

Butler's impetus for rethinking "performativity" within the context of public assembly can be reduced, for the sake of this discussion, to two important insights: Firstly, Butler argues that

[43] Of course, this would be an implication of "successful assembly", i.e., when the performative acts actually alter the discourse away from precarity. Conversely, it is also possible that "performativity" and public assembly could "fail" to the extent that it further perpetuates or induces "precarity". A neo-Nazi public assembly towards maintaining white supremacy is therefore an example of "performative" public assembly that seeks to reinstate "unliveable lives" for others.

the way in which this "precarity" is distributed and acted from during public assembly is also "performative". And secondly, Butler makes the claim that it is because of a shared condition of induced "precarity" that people should form coalitions (ibid.:38). These two claims require further examination and are now discussed.

i) Differential precarity as performative

Butler argues that the operation of precarity, and the manner in which the precarious assemble, is performative. One could also add that the inevitably performative nature of public assembly somehow implicitly and unavoidably "operationalises" differentially distributed precarity. To say that public assembly is performative is to recognise that there are certain conditions which pre-empt and create (through space, bodily acts and speech acts) the meaningful/legible actions which protestors can enact, and thereby in turn reinforce or subvert. In other words, the regulation of the public space of appearance is a vital aspect of the constitution of the body in alliance. Meaning, for Butler, the physical space and normative realm in which bodies can appear (and be recognised) is a formative aspect of making alliances or being in solidarity with others. Butler (ibid.:60, 72) makes use of the Arendtian term "space of appearance" to refer to the way in which the plurality of people together – the assembly – produces the physical and material conditions for political action. As Butler explains, for Arendt, the organisation of people in the "polis" or "city-state" arises out of acting and speaking together. This possibility of acting and speaking together is the basis and condition of politics and of power. The "space" therefore lies between the people who appear, and it is this space that brings about politics. Thus, for Arendt, it is the acting, speaking and appearing together that initiates the space of appearance, and thus politics.

However, Butler (2015) is concerned about the extent to which the political space of appearance is organised beforehand to exclude certain assemblies from appearing as political at all. Butler thereby goes on to challenge Arendt in terms of "appearance", or the ability to appear when subjecthood is not recognised in the first place. Moreover, Butler emphasises that Arendt's view of the "space of appearance" neglects to remember how action is always supported, and this infrastructural or material support should be considered part of action and part of the "space of appearance". The fact that action always needs support refers us back to Butler's understanding of the vulnerability of bodies; our exposure to each other and to the material world.

In this way, Butler destabilises Arendt's distinction between the public and the private, by referencing how the precarious can or cannot appear. As a first point of departure, Arendt positions "action" proper within the (public) space of appearance. In other words, political action transpires when people gather together in the polis, whereas notions of labour and the body is considered private and pre-political. Thus, for Arendt, the spheres of labour and work underlie and enable the sphere of (political and moral) action, but should in some sense be sealed off from the latter. Butler's argument against Arendt is that the physical space of assembling and the people who assemble are both actively participating in ways that are political and "performative". It is Arendt's exclusion of material work and resources from the political sphere that Butler resists here, by showing how the public sphere and relations of domination shape people's access to the material support we all, as material bodies, require.

Furthermore, this implies that any attempt to reflect upon public assembly as a form of political action needs to also consider how the material environment contributes – to the extent that the meaning of the physical space is altered by and through the actions that transpire there. And as an added layer, the meaning of the space and of appearing there is also predetermined by discursive norms. Also, the appearance of certain bodies in certain configurations, and enacting certain words/songs/acts, can subsequently challenge or change the prior meaning or discourse.

It is with this idea in mind that Butler (ibid.:68) argues that bodies act politically when they assemble, and that these bodies gesture "the right to have rights"[44] via their material being-in-the-world. In short, the "right to have rights" exposes the situation where, before you can claim any specific right (e.g., to healthcare), you have to claim your prior "right to rights" (citizenship). While this concept is used by both Arendt and Butler in light of the precarious position of refugees, immigrants, migrant workers and asylum seekers, it also speaks more broadly to the differential distribution of precarity, and how not everyone can appear as a subject or citizen in a political space and be recognised as such. In this way, Butler is also concerned with the precarity imposed upon everyone by neoliberalism – e.g., you become invisible as a "patient" when you cannot afford to pay for medical insurance.

[44] "The right to have rights" is another Arendtian term that was used in the 1960s to articulate how the refugees and the stateless can assert their rights. In this way, "the right to have rights is one that depends on no existing particular organization for its legitimacy" (Butler, 2015:80). Instead, this right might come into being when it is exercised in alliance.

The right to have rights therefore comes into being by virtue of the physical, or material, appearance in public space. But this is not a given – it comes into being only if recognised or acted upon. As an illegible or non-recognised being, politically speaking, I appear, and by my appearance together with others, I demand to be read and recognised as making a political claim. Butler's notion of the political as performative also refers, to a large extent, to the way the precarious can enact their right to appear by appearing.[45] Thus, in another iteration of "the right to have rights", this ambiguity of appearing in order to demand the right to appear exposes the inherent ambiguity involved when the precarious assemble. But what are the implications when precarious groups assemble to combat conditions of precarity? Or, phrased differently, how can the precarious "perform" without making themselves even more vulnerable, especially in acts aimed at combatting their induced precarity?

Butler (ibid.:65) responds to this question by introducing the concept of the "paradox of plural performativity". Butler defines this concept as the occurrence of when one is required to act in the name of a need for specific support, without having that support. Or, as she also mentions, through "precarious exercises in order to combat one's own precarity" (2009:iv). These are instances of "plural performativity", because to "act in the name of a specific need" is in the first instance to have been enacted upon discursively prior to this acting (the occurrence of induced precarity). And then, the second layer of performativity comes from the risk of this discursive formation of precarity to be re-enacted upon the subject within their own performative act of demanding that very need. For example, when the public demands of the precarious to be recognised are not met, and instead they are subjected to more violence (both physical and/or normative).

A good example that Butler mentions to illustrate this paradox is when the stateless protest within the state – that they are not recognised in – for the state recognition they desire. One of these instances occurred in May 2006, when a group of illegal immigrants gathered in the streets of Los Angeles and started singing the US national anthem both in English and in Spanish. The group alternated between singing the English and Spanish version of the US

[45] While most forms of protest tend to speak to this demand, there are of course more modest forms of public assembly that do not include "the right to have rights" so explicitly. However, the former types of more "radical" public assembly that involve "precarity" and "the right to have rights" seem to be where Butler's interest lies, as I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter.

anthem, followed by the national anthem of Mexico. In response to this intervention, Butler (2009: iv) asks:

> What kind of public performance was this street singing? Their aim was to petition the government to allow them to become citizens. But what was the way in which they made their petition? Indeed, what kind of performative exercise was this singing? They were exercising the right of free assembly without having that right. That right belongs to citizens. So, they were asserting a right they did not have in order to make the case, publicly, that they should have that very right. But obviously, they did not need to have the right in order to make a case that they should have that right. Luckily, they were not arrested, but they could have been.

Therefore, this example speaks to the "paradox of plural performativity" as a lived reality where assemblies against precarity simultaneously mobilise this precarity. It is significant to consider how exactly this precarity was mobilised. As Butler mentioned, the singing of the national anthem was a performative act of mobilising precarity as it both recognised the precarity involved in being (and appearing publically as) immigrants, and illustrated how the nature of citizenship is performative (you can sing the national anthem without actually being a citizen). This becomes paradoxical to the extent that these performative actions offer the plural possibility of risk and resistance, and it is possible that the resistance, the promise of change, does not exist without entailing the risk of injury and increased precarity (e.g., arrest). Indeed, the immigrants could have been arrested, and simultaneously their risky act of resistance could prevent other immigrants from being arrested in the future.

For the purposes of this section, the connection that Butler established between performativity and precarity can be summarised with the following questions: "how does the unspeakable population[46] speak and make its claims? What kind of disruption is this within the field of power? And how can such populations lay claim to what they require?" (ibid.:60). These questions are addressed below, with Butler's suggestion in mind that induced precarity can form the basis for coalitions.

ii) Induced Precarity as a basis for coalitions

It is owing to the differential distribution of precarity that Butler urges people to form coalitions. In other words, Butler suggests that it is through the recognition of interdependency

[46] I interpret this term to refer to the "voiceless", or those who cannot be "recognised".

and differentially shared precarity that the induced conditions of precarity can be mitigated. Moreover, it is in response to the paradox of plural performativity that Butler (ibid.:66) suggests that, for example, gender activists need to make alliances with other populations who are also considered precarious. She writes, "for the struggle for the rights of gender and sexual minorities to be a social justice struggle, that is, for it to be characterised as a radical democratic project, it is necessary to realize that we are but one population who has been and can be exposed to conditions of precarity and disenfranchisement" (ibid.:67). This insight makes it apparent that the burdens of induced precarity will not be diminished with the force of individual subversion/resistance alone.

Instead, Butler (ibid:58.) advocates for the transformative potential of solidarity. According to Butler, the existence of mutual dependency as an ontological condition can be affirmed and performed (staged, demonstrated, highlighted) by acts of solidarity.[47] This idea also refers back to the ontological condition that involves dependencies as typical of the human condition.[48] To this extent, precarity serves as "a rubric that brings together women, queers, transgender people, the poor, and the stateless" (ibid.:58). Therefore, Butler's emphasis on precarity – understood from the start as differentially distributed – as the basis for alliance(s) places relationality at the crux of political resistance. Public assembly and the forming of alliances therefore also expose the relationship between "relationality" and "precarity" in multi-faceted ways. In one way, there is the ontological mode of dependency that is shared through the general condition of "precariousness". The condition of "precarity" (as the differential allocation of precariousness) therefore serves as an invitation to recover, remember or even forge a heightened sense of mutual dependency. In another sense, the differential allocation of "precarity" as a "rubric that brings together" the differently precarious is also a reminder that our primary relations to others might differ radically from one another – especially with regards to the struggle against the norms that impact the material conditions of "liveability".[49]

[47] While Butler does not explicitly define or elaborate much on the concept of solidarity, she insists on the need for new forms of solidarity (Butler, 2015:187). This new solidarity can be understood as one that embraces the "unchosen dimension of our solidarity with others" (ibid.: 152), and that "would affirm mutual dependency and dependency on workable infrastructures and social networks" (ibid.: 22). These forms of solidarity are therefore offered in more detail within her concepts of "coalitions" and "alliances".

[48] This is once again an example of the interconnectedness of the ontological, normative and political in Butler's thinking.

[49] As I will show in the next section, Butler does not view these forms of solidarity as simple or seamless, precisely because of these points about differential precarity and relationality – points that build in, from the start, difference, plurality, and asymmetry within cooperation or appearing together.

For Butler, the struggle for plural rights[50] is not a struggle to which only some, supposedly pre-formed, identities can belong, in fact, "it is a struggle that seeks to expand what we mean when we say 'we'" (ibid.:66). The political struggle against precarity is precisely radical in that it struggles with the norms that define and shape identities, both personal and collective. What Butler seems to be implying with this statement is that appearing collectively can reconstruct the very notion of who is permitted to appear in the name of the collective "we". For example, when the bodies of transgender women are embraced in a Women's March – in recognition of a differentially shared sense of precarity – the realm of appearance for women is expanded to include more kinds of women as "recognisable". Thus, making explicit how precarity is experienced differently by publicly appearing together across differences, could be one form of combatting the contrasting ways in which, in this case, "women" are recognised. This also reminds us of Butler's point that the category of "woman" cannot be given, and this example shows how the concept of "woman" can be discursively altered or expanded.

When precarious people (who might otherwise have little in common) appear collectively, the realm of appearance and the quest for a "liveable life" are simultaneously demanded and embodied. Of course, concrete claims are also verbalised more explicitly in most forms of assembly in ways that introduce added complexity. However, Butler's point is to illustrate the embodied significance of "assembly" as an action in itself, and as a crucial element of alliances that should not go unrecognised.[51]

It is in relation to this emphasis on solidarity and coalitions that Butler speaks of a politics of vulnerability (clarified below) as a tool for the collective, and bodily, rejection of precarity. Butler's ideas surrounding the use of vulnerability as a strategy for resistance against shared precarity will be discussed in the following section.

[50] Plural rights in this context refer to collective rights. Butler emphasises plural rights specifically to combat the neoliberal "war on interdependency" (Butler, 2015:59), by which she means the inclination to substitute collective ways of thinking for an understanding of human rights, and politics more generally, as an individualised endeavour.

[51] On this understanding, no online petition, however many signatures it attracts, can ever replace a physical assembly of precarious and interdependent bodies in public. Neither the shared precarity nor the unspoken demand for recognition, neither the risk nor the promise and power of the assembled bodies can be duplicated virtually.

3.2.2. Vulnerability in Resistance

In the discussion that follows, I aim to show how Butler (re)thinks the performative activation of vulnerability and dependency as a form of political mobilisation. This discussion will be focused on Butler's argument made in *Notes* as well as her essay *"*Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance*"*, found in the edited collection of essays named *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016), which demonstrates how vulnerability and dependency (can) become a form of resistance. Before giving an account of "vulnerability" and "interdependency" in the political sense, I will first elaborate upon and distinguish between some of the basic characteristics that Butler links with these concepts. This is important as Butler employs variations of the terms "vulnerable", "vulnerability", "dependency" and "interdependency", to highlight the rich possibilities of considering vulnerability and resistance together.

As a first point of departure, Butler (2016:12) emphasises the importance of establishing the relationship between vulnerability and precarity, as they are not the same thing. While Butler (ibid.:14) fails to make the distinction explicit, she does mention that "vulnerability is the sense of 'exposure' implied by precarity". This statement suggests that the terms "precarity" and "precariousness" can be understood as the societal conditions that *mark* people as vulnerable. It follows that "precariousness" then refers to the generalised condition of vulnerability whereas "precarity" indicates the state of being deemed vulnerable (or experiencing induced exposure to vulnerability). As a consequence, "vulnerability" then refers to both the level of exposure caused by the state of generalised precariousness and induced precarity, and refers to the extent to which, as embodied beings, we are constantly yet differentially exposed to harsh materialities. These two distinct (yet mutually implicated) kinds of vulnerability will be discussed in this section.

In further unpacking the concept of vulnerability, Butler makes some claims regarding some of the generalised connotations attached to vulnerability as a concept. Butler (ibid.:4) writes that "vulnerability is a mode of relationality that speaks to the idea that the body enters into social relations first and foremost under conditions of dependency". This first part of my discussion will therefore focus on the type of vulnerability that Butler argues stems from our ontological condition of interdependency. Thereafter, I will discuss the differential exposure to vulnerability and how these two dimensions of vulnerability can be reconciled.

Firstly, Butler (ibid.:13) reflects on the temporal nature of vulnerability. Butler argues that vulnerability is not just a momentary trait of an individual body. In other words, vulnerability is not a contingent and passing circumstance. While we may feel that we are vulnerable in some instances and not in others, the basic condition of our vulnerability never changes. It is evident that in our lifetimes there are more or less vulnerable moments. For instance, our personal vulnerability might be temporarily heightened when we are sick. However, vulnerability for Butler as a constant feature means that we are vulnerable to become sick at any given time.

This introduces a second point. Butler argues that vulnerability also refers in part to that which cannot be controlled or foreseen. Similarly to the loss of a loved one, one cannot predict when these modes of vulnerability will occur. In this way, vulnerability refers to the extent that our own and our loved ones' destinies are not in our control, and by definition beyond our will. Vulnerability is therefore always either an explicit or implicit feature of our experience, and an ontological condition in ways that go above and beyond any specific temporal moments when we become explicitly or intensely aware of being vulnerable. This basic exposure never disappears completely from the lives of embodied beings.

While, on the one hand, vulnerability is something that is seen as an ontological human condition, Butler also addresses the way in which some people are typically deemed or rendered more vulnerable than others. It is worthwhile to make the distinction between these two terms clear. We are all vulnerable on a basic level. But then some of us are *rendered* more vulnerable than others, whether we have recognised this or not – this is due to relations of domination, exploitation and neglect. In a related (yet distinct) instance, some people are also *deemed* or perceived as vulnerable due to the discursive ways in which they were *rendered* vulnerable. For example, women are rendered vulnerable through the patriarchal order, but are also often deemed vulnerable as an effect of being considered "weak" or more susceptible to gender based violence.

Butler's project in *Vulnerability in Resistance* is to specifically investigate how vulnerability in relation to precarity can also be mobilised politically. As I will show, this project will eventually reconcile the different kinds of vulnerability implied by precarity and precariousness.

The first question related to vulnerability (as the sense of exposure implied by precarity) relates to what it means to be rendered and/or deemed vulnerable. As an example, Butler (2015:143)

considers the way women have been constructed (historically) as vulnerable. Because, for example, women were systematically and differentially oppressed, they became more *vulnerable* to social and economic injustice. Thus, rendered more vulnerable. On the other hand, Butler also recognises that the labelling of a specific group as vulnerable could also expose them to becoming more vulnerable (or being deemed as vulnerable). Therefore, the precarious have socially induced vulnerabilities (such as economic injustice or the threat of physical violence), as well as the discursive construction of vulnerability that comes with "normative violence" and the "unliveable life" (like rape culture, and framing women as "weaker").[52]

It is also significant in this regard to mention that Butler, in an earlier discussion in *Notes*, attributes equal performative value to "the names we are called, and that we call ourselves" (ibid.:64). It is therefore a valuable exercise to reflect on what it means to label either yourself or another as "vulnerable". This example also discloses the tension between being perceived as vulnerable and being rendered vulnerable. I think that Butler's point is that perceiving someone as vulnerable can operate as a way to also render them vulnerable. For instance, how rape culture leads to the threat of rape, or how perceiving women as weaker could lead to economic injustice. It is thus because women are rendered weak, or inferior, or merely an object of sexual gratification, that the physical and economic violence done against women is sustained and normalised. And this rendering, and deeming, can of course be asynchronous. Moreover, it is often assumed that a (precarious) body that is deemed vulnerable is incapable of acting strongly, even violently, in its own defence, precisely due to the grip of rendered vulnerability or induced precarity over certain people. However, it is also not the case that the condition of "vulnerability" is automatically conquered when vulnerable bodies act/resist their conditions of precarity.

The notion of being exposed to vulnerability thus connotes a negative interpretation of vulnerability as an exposure to harm or violence. However, by drawing on the ontological condition of vulnerability as related to dependency, Butler argues that vulnerability can be mobilised by the precarious to combat induced forms of vulnerability (ibid.:138). This point is especially positioned within the context of public assembly and alliances, where performative

[52] I also think there is an interesting intersectional aspect here – perhaps it is the case that black women are often rendered vulnerable without being deemed vulnerable, while white women are deemed vulnerable, without being comparably rendered vulnerable (to black women).

politics links with precarity. For Butler, strength is not the opposite of vulnerability, rather, in performative politics the body – signified as vulnerable - becomes part of the action and aim of the political, thereby holding the promise of action and thus of power. This becomes clear when vulnerability is itself mobilised, not as an individual strategy, but in concert. As I come to understand it, this mobilisation of vulnerability is not synonymous to the type of "performance" of vulnerability that is contained, for example, in the critical notion of "poverty porn" where poor conditions are exploited or sensationalised. Instead, Butler is proposing this "mobilisation" through a subversive or more positive re-imagining of collective vulnerability as a form of radical interdependency. This collective nature of mobilisation is at the core of Butler's interest because it exposes the embodiment of relationality, even though it might not be simple or seamless. To mobilise vulnerability (in concert) it is therefore also necessary to think of vulnerability and agency together (ibid.:139).

Butler therefore envisions a twofold sense of possibility that can stem from vulnerability, where it can address both the possibility of risk (and violence) that stems from induced precarity, and become a powerful act of resistance – based on our ontological dependency – that seeks to combat the very precarity which informed the need for resistance in the first place. In the case of the latter, it appears Butler is embracing the idea of vulnerability in the context of being exposed to harm, to consider how vulnerability can be mobilised within the context of dependency.

The terms vulnerability and dependency become linked to one another in the sense that part of what being embodied means is to open oneself up (rendering oneself vulnerable) to another or a set of others – while concurrently acknowledging that this openness toward the other is first and foremost an unwilled or involuntary openness to the other and the world. Indeed, bodies are not fully self-enclosed or fully self-reliant entities. Moreover, Butler argues that the very status of *being* vulnerable implies "our radical dependency not only on others, but on a sustaining and sustainable world" (ibid.:143). To make this claim, the term "vulnerability" (for Butler) goes beyond the connotations with exposure, to include notions of dependency, sociality and environmental structures of support (and how they are interrelated). Thus, Butler (ibid.:148) makes the point that we cannot extract the body from its constituting relations. In this sense, support and the conditions of support includes a range of acts/arrangements to enable anything from primary modes of survival to the ability to combat social injustices.

Moreover, Butler links this "positive" or productive aspect of vulnerability – being dependent on others, as well as environmental structures of support – to the politics of the precariat. Butler (ibid.:125) reminds us that bodily exposure can take different forms. She (ibid.:165) writes that conditions of precarity are, in part, the result of being unsupported by the material and infrastructural support that all bodies need in order to function well and flourish. A big part of Butler's relational argument is, therefore, that the human body also has a dependency on infrastructure and the natural and built environment, apart from its dependency on other people and discursive structures. As she states, "the body exists in relation to the supporting conditions it has and must demand, but this means that the body never exists in an ontological mode that is distinct from its situation" (ibid.:127).

Therefore, in some cases, the very conditions of political appearance to combat precarity are one of the reasons for which political assembly takes place – as the discussion on "the right to have rights" and "plural performativity" illustrated. Butler further illuminates this point with the example of Slutwalks.[53] As I mentioned in the earlier example, women are deemed vulnerable to the extent that they are exposed to risk of assault and danger when walking on the streets. During the Slutwalks they are therefore reclaiming this right – the freedom to walk on the street – by walking on the street. Once again, this exemplifies the paradox of plural performative action. Thus, by collectively appearing where it is not "safe" to appear, the induced "unliveability" of "the street"[54] is exposed.

For Butler, this performative act is both a bodily and a political movement. This is important because, in and through the embodied dimension of assembling, a shared dependency is illustrated. Thus, the act is political as the "mobilisation" of this vulnerability shows both a dependency on others in solidarity, and a dependency on an infrastructural, material good (the street as the space that supposedly facilitates free public movement on an equal basis for

[53] SlutWalk is a transnational movement calling for an end to rape culture, including victim blaming and slut shaming of sexual assault victims. Specifically, participants protest against any explaining or excusing of rape by referring to any aspect of a woman's appearance. During the #EndRapeCulture campaign in South Africa (2015–2016), numerous SlutWalks were held where women would "take back the night" by assembling in masses at night in the street, which is normally considered a space of oppression in the form of harassment, "catcalling" and the threat of physical danger. The assemblies would then also oppose the productive link in this case between being deemed vulnerable (a woman alone outside at night) and being rendered vulnerable (knowing that she is vulnerable, it is the woman's own fault if she goes out anyway and is attacked, and therefore the attack is likely to go unpunished).

[54] The term politics of "the street" refers to the public space. "Politics of the street" as a term dates to the Greek "polis" or the square. In this way, Butler uses "politics of the street" almost interchangeably with "public assembly" or "the realm of appearance".

everyone). It thus does not only draw attention to our shared, universal human condition of precariousness of bodily interdependency – it simultaneously demonstrates how precarity (e.g., vulnerability to sexual attack) is arbitrarily and differentially, and thus unjustly, distributed. One might say that through its embodied performance, the collective invites its audience to empathically imagine what it must feel like to live this particular kind of induced bodily precarity.

Moreover, the SlutWalk also implicitly presents a political opportunity to take up coalitions with other precarious groups who also find the street to be "unliveable" in intersecting ways (e.g., trans people who are harassed on the street, black bodies who are deemed criminals on the street, or Palestinians who cannot walk on certain streets).[55] To this extent, the "performance" of vulnerability by the precariat is intended to activate in the audience a sense of our shared ontological vulnerability in the world, as one way of mobilising vulnerability politically.[56]

With this performative appropriation of shared and differential vulnerability, we can start to approach a notion of plurality that is associated with both performativity and interdependency. Butler's rethinking of the concept "vulnerability" is therefore also an example of how ontology and politics come together. The ontological condition of vulnerability cannot be separated from the political context that renders some more vulnerable.

In summary, the objective of this section was to illustrate how alliances are partly formed in response to conditions of precarity, but also to show how the act of responding to these conditions is performative. Moreover, I anticipate that Butler's nuanced account of dependency and vulnerability in resistance within assemblies and alliance could also be used to deepen the understanding of "support" as a function of allyship. In the next section, I will discuss how this

[55] If precarious people perform their particular, socially induced vulnerabilities to those deemed less vulnerable, this contains the risk of rendering them even more vulnerable, and possibly even more open to abuse. There is the further danger that such a performance of vulnerability might reinforce the notion that the audience to whom the message is directed is invulnerable in comparison. Such examples of vulnerability therefore pose critical questions towards how collective action transpires across differentially precarious people. The next section will take up this point as part of the ontology of alliances.

[56] Butler makes it clear that performative action (both bodily and political) needs to be supported by solidarity in the social sense. From a relational understanding, this speaks of a mutual dependency at an ontological, political and ethical level. Perhaps a relational understanding of "support" through vulnerability and dependency can extend the possibilities for action and allyship? This is a question that I will explore further within my analysis in Chapter Four.

politics of performativity, precarity and vulnerability can be understood within Butler's ontological understanding of alliances.

3.3. Ontology of Alliances

In the second chapter of *Notes* named "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street", Butler explores what it means to be in alliance with other bodies with the aim to combat conditions of precarity (by mobilising vulnerability). Butler's notes on alliances are premised on her "weak" or "alternative" ontology that was introduced in Chapter Two. As such, her unprecedented take on the politics of alliances draws strongly on a relational ontology. In this section, I want to make clear how Butler theorised the internal politics of alliances ontologically. Butler's "ontology of alliances" will be explained by discussing her claims that the individual is already an alliance (3.3.1.) and that alliances are uneasy and unpredictable (3.3.2.).

3.3.1. Individual vs Social Action: "I am an alliance"

By characterising the struggle for gender equality as a social movement, it is made clear that political action, according to Butler, depends more on "the links between people than any notion of individualism" (2015:66). This clearly speaks to her relational ontology as worked out in her understanding of politics. Throughout *Notes*, Butler seems to address the prevailing tension between individual and social action by disrupting the need to construct such a distinction/binary in the first place. This disruption is done chiefly by arguing that even supposedly "individual action" is already assembled. Thus, just as she worked to dismantle the "sovereign" and atomistic understanding of the self or subject in the ontological dimension in her earlier work (such as *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005)), she now does so in the political dimension. The sovereign self is replaced with a constitutively relational self who cannot exist outside of the relation with the other who calls the self into being. She now shows how this is also true for the political self, or the self in resistance against prevailing norms.

The argument that individual action is already assembled is based on the intersectional[57] idea that minority and/or precarious people are always already diverse subjects. The term "double

[57] This term was coined by the critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) in an attempt to speak to the particular positionality of women of colour in the civil rights movement. The term "intersectionality" asserted an analytic frame that disrupted the tendency in social justice movements and critical social theorising "to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis" (ibid.:139).

burden of oppression" is often referenced in critiques of identity politics[58] to describe the intersecting oppression that, for example, a black woman experiences through both racial and gendered oppression. With the addition of socio-economic factors such as poverty and diaspora, it is an undeniable reality that an individual can face multiple intersecting modes of oppression. However, Butler's proposition is that when a subject in this intersecting positionality is able to call themselves an "I", it serves as a refusal to "background one minority status or lived site of precarity in favour of any other" (ibid.:68). The singular person is therefore already a plurality, a collection or collective coming together across difference. While Butler specifically uses the example of minority groups to make this claim about the singular person as a plurality, the notion of "internal diversity" is not implied to be only reserved for oppressed people.

Through this, Butler accounts for the idea that an alliance can also take place within a single subject or an "I". The following paragraph illustrates this point clearly:

> When it is possible to say "I am myself an alliance, or I ally with myself or my various cultural vicissitudes" … it is a way of saying, "I am the complexity that I am, and this means that I am related to others in ways that are essential to any invocation of this "I"". Such a view, which implicates social relationality in the first-person pronoun, challenges us to grasp the insufficiency of identitarian ontologies for thinking the problem of alliance. For the point is not that I am a collection of identities, but that I am already an assembly. (ibid.)

A key insight in the phrase "I am already an assembly" is the idea of social relationality as implicated within the first-person pronoun. This means that the temptation to neatly separate the "I" from the "we" is obscured by the fact that the "I" is already a "we", or is always the outcome of multiple "wes" in which the "I" is implicated. It is because of this view that Butler envisions a more widespread struggle against precarity that is "at once singular and plural" (ibid.:69). While Butler devotes more attention to argue explicitly for plurality within the singular, her vision for "a more widespread struggle" against precarity seems to imply that the "we" is relationally implicated in a "singular body" or coalition – that can also be called an alliance. However, as I will explicate in section 3.3.2., this singularity in the plural, or the "we",

[58] In contrast to intersectional approaches, identity politics emerged in the context of civil rights movements in the 1970s, referring to the political approach that recognises certain groups as oppressed, and the formation of exclusive socio-political alliances to combat this oppression. Alliances formed on the basis of identity politics are therefore founded on shared experiences of members of a specific social group (Heyes, 2018). In contemporary conversations, the notion of identity politics has undergone numerous criticisms on the basis of its lack of intersectional consideration (Heyes, 2018).

does not necessarily equate to social cohesion or harmony. It appears that Butler is suggesting – through this relational ontology of thinking difference from within – that the fact that it's possible for a person to acknowledge their already plural way of being attests to the possibility for thinking of alliances more broadly. In other words, if I can "ally with myself", given the often disparate groups to which "I" constitutively belong, and by whom I am called into being and held to account, then that will form the basis on which I can also "ally" with others.[59]

If this relational notion of alliances as already plural (in terms of collective difference), even on an individual level, is considered seriously, then what does it mean for one person to ally with another person? This is the type of question that I will focus on in Chapter Four, however, some preliminary comments might be useful to expose the as yet unexplored questions that stem from Butler's relational ontology of alliances. While Butler is not invoking the term "ally" within the context of "social justice allies" in the extract above, her claim remains applicable. This understanding could lead one to think that the term "ally" should automatically be linked with the term "alliance". In this case, any individual "ally" would already be an "alliance", and by implication every "alliance" would be a collection of these "plural" single subjects who share something in concert across difference. This insight can therefore challenge notions of "allyship" which draw strongly on identity politics or notions of the sovereign subject – not only is identity not something you can bracket, it is also not stable in the first place, obscuring the dividing lines or borders between the "I" and the "we".

To understand Butler's coalitional view of "bodies in alliance" it is also necessary to unpack how she views the individual body (as already plural) in relation to the larger social collection of bodies. Butler notes that the idea of the body as a unit, often understood as a singular, ideal or typical body, is contradictory to her view of the body and its supporting relations. For example, she mentions that when a statement such as "every single body has the right to food and shelter" is made, it implies both a universal application and an individualised discreteness with regards to the body. In this abovementioned statement, the individual body becomes the norm for how bodies ought to be conceptualised. However, Butler (ibid.:129) problematises

[59] This reminds me of Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic argument in *Strangers to Ourselves* (1988). Her premise is that because there is something strange or other within the self (in a repressed manner), that strangeness is made abject and projected onto Others as strange. "Abjection" is therefore a powerful concept that embodies the distortion between what is inside and outside as never fully contained. This can be an interesting and helpful parallel to draw on when thinking politically of the relationship between ally and alliance. In other words, one might say: if I can ally with someone, it is only because I am already an ally or alliance to myself.

this notion as she thinks it fails to address the "vulnerability, exposure, even dependency, that is implicated by the right itself". To say that "every single body" deserves a right therefore neglects to acknowledge the constitutive plurality that exists within, and at the same time transcends, the single subject. Further, it neglects to acknowledge the differential distribution of those whose right to food and shelter is threatened.

While it could be said against Butler that the claim "every single body has the right to food" does indeed implicitly speak to the body's dependency, and acknowledges that the body cannot function without food, or that it also implicitly acknowledges that not every body has access to food (otherwise there is no need for the demand to be made), I maintain that the relational aspect of the body is neglected by the above-mentioned rights talk. The point Butler is trying to make clear is that the failure to consider the human body in connection to its various networks and connections will also result in the failure to achieve the political ends which "we"[60] seek to attain. The crux of this argument can be found in the following passage:

> What I am suggesting is that it is not just this or that body that is bound up in a network of relations, but that the body, despite its clear boundaries, or perhaps precisely by virtue of those very boundaries, is defined by the relations that make its own life and action possible. As I hope to show, we cannot understand bodily vulnerability outside of this conception of its constitutive relations to other humans, living processes and inorganic conditions and vehicles for living. (ibid.:130)

The ontological argument which stems from this example is therefore that the body is also largely defined by virtue of its dependency on other bodies and networks of support. The conventional "body talk" that operates within the singular (every single body) therefore obscure its embeddedness in personal and interpersonal relations. In line with Butler, one could also say that "every body", because of this embeddedness, refers beyond itself, so that any

[60] Butler (2015:134) later explains that her use of the word "we" also exposes how "the category still has its grip even as we try to shake ourselves loose from its holds". The grip of the "we" can be located in both the implied homogeneity of the collective, and in the possibility of constructing the borders of belonging too narrowly. However, by considering what it means to claim a collective "we", Butler's relational analysis also seeks to expand its reach by acknowledging and thereby challenging the fact that sometimes the (marginalised) "we" is too precarious to be considered as part of the (normative/included) "we". For example, those who are desperately poor might not have the means to access "the street" where they can demand a more "liveable life". I think this is what Butler means by the idea that part of the "we" is too precarious to be recognised as included in the "we" to which they implicitly belong. This idea introduces the concept of allyship. Would economically privileged people that gather on behalf of the poor be an example of challenging the fact that the "we" is sometimes broader than who is able to "show up"?

collective of bodies in assembly always point to other, similarly and differently positioned, bodies. These bodies are explicitly absent from the assembly, but implicitly included in the struggle. However, it is also important to note that Butler (ibid.) is not suggesting that individual bodies are blended into one big unstructured social body. Or that the collective erases the distinctiveness of individual and unique, singular, bodies. For example, if the right to food and shelter was rephrased to say "all bodies have the right to food and shelter" it might also neglect to acknowledge the fact that this right is not equally distributed. Butler's point is rather that the boundaries between bodies is what situate bodies in alliance as always inter- or between-bodies.

Butler's relational ontology conceives of a body, "undone by the other", that is always considered both "mine and not mine". The notion of the body "undone" by the other was expressed previously in *Undoing Gender* (2004:19) where Butler wrote:

> Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something. If this seems so clearly the case with grief, it is only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact. It may be that one wants to, or does, but it may also be that despite one's best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel. And so when we speak about my sexuality or my gender, as we do (and as we must), we mean something complicated by it. Neither of these is precisely a possession, but both are to be understood as modes of being dispossessed, ways of being for another, or, indeed, by virtue of another.

Part of what being in relation to others means is therefore to be undone by virtue of our encounter with others. This does not mean that all bodies are undone by one another in similar ways, but moments of grief, or desire, or (in this instance) public assembly, remind us that our bodies are not isolated entities, and that we do not fully or fundamentally belong to ourselves. Butler (ibid.:13) refers to this phenomenon of our bodies being "both mine and not mine" as the "paradox of bodily autonomy", where our bodies belong to us but are always implicated with the other. This begs the question whether anyone can ever claim their body as exclusively their own. Politically, this paradox also implies that bodies who struggle with the norm do not only struggle for rights that attach to their own personhood, but rather, it is a relational struggle to be conceived by others, and thus to be treated by others, as persons worthy of a life worth living, by others. Every political struggle is a relational struggle.

Moreover, Butler is also emphasising the relations between bodies and the spaces that hold and support them. It is for this reason that Butler does not approach the chapter named "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street" as two separate discussions in *Notes*. Ontologically, "the street" also forms part of the politics that materialises in-between bodies. As such, it is equally important to consider the way in which the presence of bodily movements and speech acts alter the "public character of that material environment" (Butler, 2015:71). The #RhodesMustFall movement offers a helpful example/illustration of this. While it was argued that the public memorialisation of Cecil John Rhodes (the enormous and spatially central, even dominating statue) on the university campus exposed and heightened the precarious position of black students, it is equally important to reflect on how the movement also altered the material environment in which it took place. Thus, the protestors were able to reconstruct or re-signify the material campus environment when the statue was first vandalised and finally removed, and at the same time the material presence of the Rhodes statue also participated or acted as it formed part of the impetus for the students' acting. When talking about Butler's ontology of alliances, this emphasis on the materiality, and agency, of supporting or oppressive environments needs to be included.

Butler's relational understanding of alliances therefore offers a rich response to the complexities of alliances by a) disrupting the false binary between the individual and the collective, and by b) expanding the scope of who/what can be considered as part of the agents within the alliance, thereby illustrating that we are inherently and inescapably dependent on both other bodies as well as structural networks of support when combatting precarity. Every protest is an unavoidably relational exercise, aimed at transforming relations between bodies, relations of domination, and relations of support.

3.3.2. Unchosen, Uneasy and Unpredictable Alliances

Another aspect of Butler's "ontology of alliances" relates to the unchosen, uneasy and unpredictable feature of alliances. It is easy to conflate alliances with a joyful sense of shared solidarity and similarity of experience. However, Butler cautions against this idea by emphasising the difficulty that always and necessarily accompanies acts of alliance against precarity.

As a first point of departure, Butler (2015:113) writes that "for the most part, when we arrive, we don't know who else is arriving, which means that we accept the kind of unchosen

dimension to our solidarity with others". Part of what distinguishes public assembly from communitarian actions is therefore the fact that "very often those links we make are anonymous" (Butler, 2017). Because of this anonymity, alliances are not premised on a sense of personal connection. Instead, Butler (2017) advocates for "a passionate commitment to everyone and anyone" that can transcend personal or communitarian bonds that we can enter knowingly. For Butler, one could say that the entering of an alliance against precarity is therefore in a sense a performance, a rendering explicit, of the way in which, and extent to which, we are constituted by others, even anonymous others. An acknowledgement that we do not belong to ourselves and are both called into being and undone by others.

Moreover, the unchosen element of coalitions or solidarity speaks to a distinct type of political action. Specifically, Butler's (ibid.:129) relational ontology reminds us that the body is always "exposed to people and impressions it does not have a say about, predict or fully control". However, the unchosen coalitions or "unity" that stems from our embodied sociality also exposes the "uneasy" element that comes with forming alliances or coalitions with unknown others. In this regard, Butler (ibid.:130) makes an important distinction regarding the nature of coalitions when she says "political action does not require a unity based on agreement. It is coalitional, but not liberal pluralist." Perhaps this quote needs further unpacking. For coalitions to not be considered "liberal pluralist", it would mean that there is a certain agreement that transcends merely peacefully tolerating each other. This type of political agreement that Butler envisions (or advocates for) therefore demands a commitment to engage with the difficulty that accompanies difference, instead of assuming a kind of liberal universal sameness. Rather, it seems that Butler's idea of coalitions accounts for the complexities and challenges that accompany difference.

In a similar discussion, Butler (ibid.:140) also mentioned that "we remember that the term queer does not designate identity, but alliance,[61] and it is a good term to invoke as we make uneasy and unpredictable alliances in the struggle for social, political, and economic justice". What I think is significant about this comment is that it uses the "surplus in meaning" or the "plural performativity" of the word queer quite powerfully to also demonstrate the workings of power through difference. Originally the term queer meant "strange" or "different", and now

[61] In terms of her own deconstruction of personal and group identity, it makes sense that she chooses for action over identity. At the same time, Butler also speaks of alliances in terms of individual vs social identities. In both cases, I think she is still preoccupied with dismantling forms of sovereign subjectivity.

it has been appropriated to include an alliance of sexual and gender minorities, of action across difference, strangeness and unease. There is thus something to be said, though not romanticised, for how the uneasiness surrounding difference could also become a powerful tool to form alliances against social injustices.

Not only does dependency stem from our embodied relationality and vulnerability, being vulnerable to one another also speaks toward the risks involved with the formation of anonymous constellations. The following quote by black feminist Bernice Johnson Reagon, in her article *Coalition Politics: Turning the Century* (1983), is a powerful articulation of how uneasiness, risk and vulnerability function within these unknown and anonymous coalitions or alliances:

> You don't go into coalition because you like it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that's the only way you can figure you can stay alive… that's why we have to have coalitions, cause I ain't gonna let you live unless you let me live. Now there's danger in that, but there's also the possibility that we can both live– if you can stand it. (ibid.:357)

Reagon provides a poignant reminder of the internal risk and tension that always accompany alliances. These risks can, in part, be attributed to the ontological condition of always, to some extent, unknowingly appearing to one another and together, to others, across different ways and degrees of living with precarity. As Butler (2015:72) maintains: "interdependency is not the same as social harmony. We rail against those upon whom we are most dependent (or those who are most dependent on us), and there is no way to dissociate dependency from aggression once and for all." This can also be related back to the double nature of exposure or vulnerability in the sense that we are both inevitably vulnerable to violence, but also exposed to a formative relationship at the same time (called into being and undone at the same time).

What is made clear is that alliances and coalitions which are formed to combat social injustice are not necessarily instances of pure social harmony, and are maybe of necessity not so. The next section will explore how Butler theorises our obligations to others across proximity and difference within the political sphere. By promising that she will "consider not just what it means to ally with one another, but to live with one another", Butler (ibid.:70) also attempts to show how a politics of alliance is dependent on an "ethics of cohabitation".

3.4. Ethics of Cohabitation

In the introduction to *Notes*, Butler (2015:21) already mentions that an ethical conception of human relationality criss-crosses throughout her political analysis. Underlying Butler's relational conception of "bodies in alliance" is the notion that we are called to a certain responsibility to act or respond to the other. To this extent, this section aims to investigate Butler's ethical conception of human relationality within the politics of alliances. While what Butler calls the "ethics of cohabitation" can be read as a more general contribution in the context of global or transnational politics, I will argue that the ethical questions posed can be a helpful starting point to consider an ethics of alliances or allyship, as I will continue to explore in Chapter Four.

Based on the anonymous nature of alliances, Butler specifically addresses questions regarding forms of ethical obligation among those who do not share "a geographical or linguistic sense of belonging" within her final chapters in *Notes*. The theorising of her "ethics of cohabitation" is achieved by focusing mostly on reconciling and reconstructing the thoughts of Levinas and Arendt. While this section will focus on providing an account of Butler's specific engagement with ethics of public assembly, it should not be interpreted as separate from her more general ethical inquiries, especially within the realm of the political.

Butler (2015:100) starts off the chapter "Precarious Life and the Ethics of Cohabitation" by making explicit the two main questions which she wishes to address, namely:

a) Whether any of us have the capacity or inclination to respond ethically to suffering at a distance, and what makes that ethical encounter possible when it does take place?

b) What it means for our ethical obligations when we are up against another person or group, find ourselves invariably joined to those we never chose, and must respond to solicitations in languages we may not understand or even wish to understand.

These questions will be addressed by firstly elaborating on Butler's response to Levinas's ethics of obligation across proximity, and secondly on Arendt's ethics of unchosen obligations.

3.4.1. Levinasian Ethics and Obligations to the Other

The first element which Butler elaborates upon is the notion of proximity and ethical relations. These ethical obligations, or impositions, also apply to those who are not physically close

enough to even be recognisable as the other who compels one to act. My earlier example of the desperately poor or ill who might not be able to "appear" or "make an ethical demand" would apply to this particular claim of Butler's. Butler therefore questions how we can have an ethical relation with those who do not even appear on our horizon of ethics (because of their induced precarity that renders them unrecognisable or ungrievable). And from this the more relevant question becomes: whom are we ethically bound to? And more so: how does proximity impact our ability to respond ethically?

With these questions, Butler is specifically referring to political suffering that happens at a distance, but that (for example) through imagery or the media is at the same time within and without our proximity. The media can therefore transport the suffering of others (both near and far) across proximity. In the past, Butler has specifically referred to the impact of war imagery to end the Vietnam War (or the American War, as it is referred to in Vietnam) as an example of this. A more contemporary example related to this paradox of proximity that comes to mind is the increased imagery on social media regarding the war and famine in Yemen in attempt to raise awareness regarding the suffering that happens at a distance. However, Butler's discussion on proximity also includes political suffering that happens nearby but is obscured by a perceived distance or ethical separation. In South Africa, the gang violence and violence against women on the Cape Flats (whose numbers have been equated to war statistics)[62] come to mind for someone like me who lives in the Western Cape, maybe 30–40 km from the Flats. Indeed, it is possible that the "war" in your own background seems further away than it actually is – this might in part be due to media and/or government neglect. And, of course, less radical examples apply similarly.

This idea becomes linked to Butler's previous insights regarding grievability. Whose lives are deemed worthy of being grieved by the collective "we"? In the same way, who is differentially more likely to receive the ethical response of others? On a global level, this has been the debate when it comes to various social justice movements. Why do we respond to Paris attacks more than to the suffering in Sudan or Egypt? The answer is clearly not that, for example, the Eiffel Tower has ethical precedence over the Amazon rainforest, or that it is necessarily physically closer to us, but rather something in line with the differential allocation of precarity largely

[62] Stone (2019) points out that the BBC compared crime stats in the Cape Flats to those of actual war zones. "Whilst the country as a whole fell short of war zone numbers, certain areas had murder stats topping the likes of Afghanistan and Iraq."

sustained by mainstream media and societal biases more generally – and how that makes the urgency of some responses more visible than others. At the same time, the media has the capability of making the demands of the precarious more visible or indeed less visible, across the barriers of physical (or emotional) distance, ethnic difference or moral indifference.

In this sense, the question also becomes: How do we respond ethically when we are overexposed to suffering and social injustice because of the media's ability to bring far-off suffering into our homes? Butler (2015:102) writes that we are ethically overwhelmed at such instances, and further interrogates whether it would be problematic if we are not. For example, when we are confronted with imagery of war, protest, or famine, something impinges on us without our ability to prepare ourselves or anticipate it in advance. Butler (ibid.:101) argues that this imposition, beyond our will, creates an ethical obligation that does not require any form of consent. In other words, they are not the result of contracts that we willingly enter. Nonetheless, ethical questions can emerge from these unexpected encounters. Butler asks:

> Is what is happening so far away from me that I can bear no responsibility for it? Is what is happening so close to me that I cannot bear having to take responsibility for it? If I myself did not make this suffering, am I still in some other sense responsible for it?. (ibid.)

In order to start considering how to approach the questions posed above, Butler (ibid.:102) advocates for a kind of response that can surpass the individual ego. To frame these questions solely in terms of the responsibility of the (sovereign) "I", disregards that it "both is and is not" my response/responsibility, because it disregards the extent to which I am already an alliance. So then, how is it possible to consider ethical obligations or ethical responsiveness that "implies a dispossession of ego"?

Butler (ibid.:101) suggests that there is a Levinasian element that underpins this moment of being exposed to matters that might require ethical obligations, while never being able to choose such exposure. This idea refers to the notion that "the other acting upon us without our will, constitutes the occasion of an ethical appeal or solicitation" (ibid.:106). In a similar structure to how the self emerges in the first place, we are acted upon before we have a choice. As I mentioned in section 2.4.3., Levinas is clear about the notion that no ethics can be derived from egoism. In other words, ethics is in the first instance demanded by the other, in a way that precedes any understanding of who I am or who that other is. This also recalls Levinas's idea that we are taken "hostage by the other". We are affected and claimed by "the face" at the same

time. For Levinas, those who act upon us are clearly other to us, and it is precisely not by virtue of their sameness to us that we are bound to them. Butler (ibid.:108) points out that, for Levinas, the other is placed within a position of ethical priority over the self. Thus, for Levinas, reciprocity cannot be the basis for ethics, and our ethical relation to the other is not something that follows from our *being* in the world together. Rather, there is something fundamentally asymmetrical about the ethical relation.

However, Butler questions this notion by asking: "Does the other not have the same obligation towards me?" Why is it the case that I should be obligated towards another who does not ethically reciprocate? In contrast to Levinas, Butler (ibid.:108) argues that the insight that "I am already bound to you" is what constitutes the self. Where Butler argues that the subject is birthed through discourse and norms, it seems that the Levinasian subject is birthed through the ethical encounter. Thus, for Levinas, ethics precedes ontology and epistemology, and for Butler, ethics follows from ontology. Butler (ibid.) thereby distances herself from Levinas by claiming that our dependency on others, and our inescapable sociality, constitutes our ethical relations – as always prior to the ontology of the ego. An ontology based on our relation to the other in this sense precedes an ontology of the self or ego.

Butler (ibid.:108) also asks: "what are the conditions under which someone can appear as an Other with a face that delivers an ethical demand?" or "what are the limitations to our ability to assume responsibility?" Butler's response to this idea is that the other and the self are more intertwined than Levinas chooses to acknowledge:

> If we are always already dependent on the other then there are surely others distinct from me whose ethical claim upon me is irreducible to an egoistic calculation on my part. This is because we are at the same time distinct from and bound to each other in ways that transcend human form. (Butler, ibid.: 109)

Butler therefore shares the idea with Levinas that the ethical demand is an unchosen imposition that cannot be restricted to the "I", and in particular not to the "I's" conscious choice. But in this sense, the ethical call from the other is not imposed on the "I", rather, the "I" was already capable of receiving the call before responding to it because of the "I's" ontological indebtedness to others. Also note that this form of relationality "transcends human form", thereby alluding to a more ecological account of relationality as well.

The crux of Butler's relational insight regarding ethical obligations is that "ethical responsibility presupposes ethical responsiveness" (ibid.:110). The point that the Other demands an ethical response from the subject is therefore firstly dependent on the willingness of the subject to receive an ethical call. This idea was echoed before in a conversation where Butler &Athanasiou (2013:105) suggested to Butler that responsiveness and responsibility be thought together. For Athanasiou, the relationship between these two concepts is defined as taking responsibility for the relations one did not choose, and whose shaping of oneself one cannot oversee. So one way of thinking about this paradox is to say that I take voluntary and conscious responsibility for formative relations that preceded my will and consciousness, and in fact helped to shape them. She writes:

> In a world of differentially shared sociality, if we are already "outside ourselves", beyond ourselves, and bound by claims that emerge from outside or from deep inside ourselves, our very notion of responsibility requires this sense of dispossession as disposition, exposure and self-othering. (Butler &Athanasiou, 2013:106)

This "dispossession as disposition" is where the involuntary becomes voluntary, and thereby becomes a conscious disposition. Moreover, ethical relations are "mediated" by our unwilled openness towards an Other that can always be foreclosed – and that openness depends on which others can appear as others at all. Butler's suggestion seems to be that we require the ability for "visual, spatial and linguistic and embodied translations" to contest the notion that ethical obligations only emerge in established communities (Butler, 2015:113). Ethical obligations therefore cross linguistic or national boundaries in translation. And these translations might become possible within uneasy and unpredictable alliances or coalitions. As Butler writes:

> We can be alive or dead to the suffering of others, they can be dead or alive to us. But it is only when we understand that what happens there also happens here, and that "here" is already elsewhere, and necessarily so, that we stand a chance of grasping the difficult and shifting global connections in ways that let us know the transport and the constraint of what we might still call ethics. (ibid.:122)

Butler's discussion on ethical obligations across proximity therefore offers a rich framework to consider how ontological relationality entails or implies both ethical responsibility and ethical responsiveness. Again, there seems to be an ontological insight underlying her specific relational ethics. Something along the lines of "we are all to some extent affected by any injustice that happens anywhere in the world" – all injustice affects everyone negatively in

some way. Moreover, Butler's refusal to think of obligation as an ethics for the sovereign, isolated and supremely independent "I" offers valuable possibilities to challenge principle-based, or individualised, accounts of allyship in the upcoming chapter. In the next section, I will show how Butler tries to answer questions regarding the ethics stemming from the unchosen elements of relational existence within a re-reading of Hannah Arendt.

3.4.2. Arendt: "Unchosen" Ethical Obligations and the Space of Appearance

In *Notes*, Butler utilises Hannah Arendt as a precursor to point out how freedom within the political space, and political action, is relational. Departing from a similar critique as Levinas against the liberal conception of individualism, Arendt argues that our ethical responsibility is not only towards those with whom we have knowingly entered into a relationship. In this way, the previously described discussion about Butler and Levinas becomes linked with Butler's emphasis on the anonymity of alliance, according to Butler's reading of Arendt. The basis of this argument is that "no one has the prerogative to choose with whom to cohabit the earth" (Butler, 2015:111). In this sense, Butler makes clear that recognition of the unchosen element of cohabitation is Arendt's condition for existence as ethical and political subjects.

By implication, the concept of "freedom" within democratic practice becomes directly associated with the plurality which we cannot choose, but which constitutes us. By being free (together) there is a collective agreement regarding, or recognition of, the unchosen element that underpins this freedom. This also relates to Butler's idea of plurality as distinct from liberal pluralism (where both individual choice and freedom and the acknowledgement of diversity is privileged), and therefore entangled within unknown and uneasy forms of collective appearance across difference. More so, Butler (ibid.:113) makes use of this Arendtian idea to argue that:

> Not only do we live with those we never chose and with whom we may feel no immediate sense of social belonging, but we are also obligated to preserve those lives and the open-ended plurality that is the global population.

By basing "concrete political norms and policies" on the unchosen dimension of cohabitation, Butler also argues that those who inhabit certain communities also inhabit the earth, and therefore it is not only our ethical obligation to sustain these communities, but also the earth itself (ibid.:114). Butler's reference to the "earth" in this context refers to the physical environment that we inhabit, and can therefore also be linked to her previous relational

argument on the importance of recognising the environmental networks of support, such as infrastructure, within political spaces. And, of course, the politics of sustaining communities and the earth itself becomes interesting within examples where the political demand for land (or a piece of the earth) is a precondition for the political commitment to each other.[63]

This ecological critique that Butler raises againts Arendt's anthropocentric understanding of the political can also provide an interesting expansion for thinking about allyship. Does the unchosen dimension of our being on earth also suppose an ethical obligation for humans as allies for the earth, or even more so, for the earth as already an ally for humans? While this point might come across as a theoretical stretch, it does once again put into question how political freedom and obligations towards unchosen others (and environments) are considered within contemporary politics.

Butler's reading of Arendt also makes clear that on the basis of her political conception of plurality, any "exclusively national, racial, or religious" foundations for citizenship and alliance ought to be refused (Butler, 2015:111). By implication, there is no population, community or nation state that can claim the earth exclusively for themselves, and this flows precisely from our unwilled proximity and unchosen cohabitation. The ethical and political reliance on the unchosenness of our ontological subjecthood holds the promise of a different mode of relational sociality and politics that transcends the pre-existing borders of belonging.

At the same time, Butler (ibid.:117) also provides a critical reading of Arendt to the extent that the relationship between precarity and power is still underexplored in the latter, especially in the context of the private realm of (bodily) appearance. In this sense, Butler's point is, as articulated previously, that our ethical obligations to the "unchosen" is also grounded in an understanding of our bodily precarity.

According to Arendt, "the space of appearance comes into being in the moment of political action" (in Butler, 2015:117). However, the political realm, for Butler, now includes the media, and because of this, the ethical demands of our times are dependent on "the reversibility of proximity and distance" (Butler, 2015:97). Butler's (2015:117) argument against Arendt is that she fails to consider that the actual conditions for being able to gather are separate from the

[63] Specifically, Butler (2015:114) recalls the Jewish sovereignty in Israel against Palestine as related to the claim to the land. This demand for land, for belonging on and to the land through ownership, is also a key political demand in contemporary South Africa.

space of appearance. Thus, the conditions for political action are also what enable political action. This is why there is such a big relational emphasis in Butler on the various environmental, virtual and structural platforms which make this support possible.

Thus, part of the plurality of politics is also our interdependency on sustaining and supporting conditions and resources for alliances to take shape – such as infrastructure, virtual spaces and environmental considerations. However, it remains the case for Butler that ethical obligations emerge within these "antagonistic modes of cohabitation", as they speak to the social conditions (of a liveable life) that still have to be achieved (Butler, ibid.:121). Butler's ethics of interdependency therefore represents something of the difficulty, as well as the promise, of egalitarian politics. In other words, the unchosen dimension of social life supplies us with the ideals towards which we ought to work together. This includes the difficult ways of being together, as well as the existing inclinations towards (normative) violence, even within alliances of protest, as Reagon reminded us.

Butler (ibid.:121) writes: "because we are bound to realize these conditions[,] we are also bound to one another, in passionate and fearful alliance, often in spite of ourselves, for a "we" that is constantly in the making". This rich quote encapsulates the complex ways in which Butler's ontological, ethical and political relationality plays itself out within alliances. In the first place, it is by realising the "sustaining and supporting" conditions for action, such as infrastructure, mutual recognition, and the health of the earth, that we are also unknowingly devoted to one another. In the second place, by being called together within these uneasy and unfamiliar alliances, it also becomes possible to expand the very notion of plurality or collective belonging that attempts to eradicate induced modes of precarity. The relation between discourse, networks of support, and combatting the conditions of precarity, are therefore mutually implicated by one another. And lastly, by means of this interrelatedness, alliances always hold the possibility of extending the borders of belonging, of transcending the "we" of the moment.

In the next chapter, I will provide a more in-depth reading of Butler's interpretation of Arendt, specifically when considering the bodily dimensions of "allies in action". For this chapter, Butler's reading of Arendt still provides a powerful lens for rethinking what it means to "appear" politically, and to question what the sustaining and supporting conditions are that make political action possible for the precarious.

3.5. Conclusion

To conclude, in this chapter I set out to thematically explore Butler's thinking on alliances as theorised in *Notes*. In keeping with the three components of Butler's relational thinking, I considered the ideas put forth by Butler according to her *politics* of precarity and vulnerability; her *ontology* of alliances, and her *ethics* of cohabitation.

In section 3.2., I illustrated how by considering the relation between performativity and precarity in the politics of assemblies, Butler is able to contemplate how the differential distribution of precarity compels us to form alliances. I also illustrated how Butler rethinks the concept of vulnerability as having a twofold significance. In this sense, induced vulnerability stemming from precarity can be minimised by mobilising the more relational understanding of vulnerability as a shared sense of precariousness.

In section 3.3. I delved into the crux of Butler's understanding of alliances as theorised in *Notes.* In the first instance, this discussion revolved around Butler's notion that "the individual is already an alliance". As such, Butler's relational politics challenges the distinction between individual and social action within alliances. Regarding the ontology of alliances, it would have been easy to keep the discussion at a utopian, seemingly empowering, idea regarding alliances, coalitions and solidarity; however, Butler opts for the more nuanced discussion that involves the insight that alliances are neither easy, nor predictable. Instead coalitions are risky and difficult, and this acknowledgment lies at the heart of our relational commitments to each other.

Lastly, section 3.4. considered Butler's ethics of cohabitation. By drawing on both Levinas and Arendt as precursors, Butler rethinks ethical responsibility and responsiveness across proximity. By asking how we can respond ethically to the suffering of unchosen others, and by expanding the ways in which we can rethink broader networks of support, Butler situates a deeply relational ethics within the realm of political action.

Butler's discussion of politics, ethics and ontology in *Notes* therefore bring me one step closer towards considering the discourse of allyship from a relational lens. While Butler, did not explicitly speak to allyship, it can be concluded that her thinking offers a relational vocabulary for me to do so – and this will be the focus of the next and final chapter: Chapter Four.

CHAPTER FOUR: TOWARDS A RELATIONAL ANALYSIS OF ALLYSHIP

4.1. Introduction

Drawing on the theoretical insights of the previous chapters, this final chapter will provide a relational analysis of "allyship" within the discourse of embodied political protest action. Having focused extensively on the various aspects of Butler's relational thinking in the previous chapters, I wish to now return to the following question: What are the implications of Butler's relational thinking for the discourse and practice of allyship?[64] Before delving into this question, I will briefly set the scene for this chapter and explain its structure. Before this, it is important to show that I discerned three possible implications of her thinking for allyship.

It has been stated multiple times throughout this study that Butler does not explicitly mention or unpack the specific notion of "allyship" in the context of alliances herself. And so, the first possible implication relates to my impression that the topic of "allyship" was simply beyond the scope of Butler's work, particularly within her project of considering public assembly in *Notes*. This is because Butler has a clear focus on the ways in which the extremely precarious can "appear" and "resist", and as such the concept of allyship does not feature as a question in its own right. In this regard, the eclectic examples of public assembly that Butler makes use of throughout *Notes* all seem to relate to quite radical forms of assembly, to the extent that they exclusively focus on precarious groups combatting their own precarity via "the right to have rights". As such, these examples do not focus on the possible supporting role of those who are less precarious.

Beyond my first impression that allyship is outside Butler's scope of interest, a second implication of Butler's work for the allyship discourse is that her apparent (perhaps intentional) failure to address the topic of allyship might dissolve the very notion of allyship. While Chapter Three of this study clearly illustrated that there were instances in Butler's thinking on alliances where she seems to be hinting towards a form of allyship, there is also a line of thinking in her work that seems to counter, or at least problematise, the very notion of allyship. The main problem with allyship that I could identify, based on Butler's thinking, is that the very

[64] This question was phrased similarly in my research question as "in what way may Judith Butler's relational thinking contribute to a more nuanced and clearer understanding of the complex ambiguities or 'surplus in meaning' accompanying allyship?".

definition[65] of allyship seems to be guilty of assuming an individualised ontology of the stable and sovereign subject (that is expected to give an account of itself). Additionally, Butler's suggestion that "the individual is already an alliance" further problematises the distinctive categorisation of political actors that always seem implicated within the notion of allyship (such as between those with, and those without, privilege or recognition or voice).

The second implication thus entails that Butler's radical notion of relationality dissolves the key philosophical assumptions that go into the making of "the ally". And, as such, perhaps one implication of Butler's relational thinking entails the very *impossibility* of thinking together the concepts of conventional understandings of "allyship" and radical, ontological "relationality". This is because the identitarian assumptions within the definition of allyship stand in contrast to Butler's relationality that conceives of the subject as opaque and always intrinsically implicated by the other. To put the tension as starkly as possible: while conventional understandings of allyship make the allied relation dependent upon clearly demarcated and opposed prior individual identities (with and without privilege relative to context), Butler's radically relational approach places the relationship prior to individual identities. To this extent, Butler's thinking led me to question whether there could be something problematic about the temptation to consider allyship as an isolated theoretical phenomenon. Meaning, is it possible to isolate an exploration of allyship from the broader construction of alliances? Can we really separate out allies (and those allied with or to) as "single subjects" with distinctive characteristics? Butler's relational thinking therefore prompted me to reconsider the ontological significance of allyship altogether – based specifically on its general definition and its normative injunctions. And this is what will be worked out in detail in the current chapter.

Yet, a third implication surfaced for me, in that a Butlerian analysis might be drawn upon to argue that precisely because the discourse of allyship is currently so pervasive – with real impacts upon the shape of political protest (especially to the extent of buzzword status) – it is significant to acknowledge and unravel what allyship *means* socially, ethically and politically. I reminded myself that Butler's notion of "subversion" would welcome the practice of critically examining the discourse of allyship from within its own contours. In this regard, it would in fact be very un-Butlerian to dismiss the possibilities that relationality holds for allyship as a socio-political phenomenon. My (Butlerian) relational analysis of allyship will therefore be informed by this dual project of both critically interrogating and subverting the assumptions,

[65] This definition will be elaborated upon in more detail shortly.

and the political implications, that inform the mainstream discourse of allyship, and at the same time constructively searching for new understandings of the same context, inspired by Butlerian insights into relationality. With these three implications in mind, Butler remains a helpful thinker for me to draw upon for investigating the notion of allyship because, as I mentioned previously, her insights regarding assembly and alliances provide a useful starting point for doing so, especially within the discipline of philosophy.

Before moving on to my analysis proper, I also want to briefly set the scene in terms of how I wish to engage with the allyship discourse in this final chapter. As mentioned in Chapter One, the discourse on allyship can be understood within this study as both the academic literature, as well as the more general socio-political texts found within the public sphere. Because of the buzzword status of the term "allyship", any "desktop study" will clearly show an abundance of resources, opinion pieces, infographics and guidelines on search engines and social media platforms that speak to the various ways in which allyship can/should be understood or practiced. I consider these resources as valuable texts to gauge the so-called social discourse surrounding allyship. I will therefore put these examples in conversation with Butler's relational thinking to expose and engage with the ontological, ethical and political "surplus in meaning" that accompanies concrete examples of allyship, as illustrated with the human shield case study in Chapter One.

My relational analysis will therefore be achieved by revisiting and elaborating upon the social and academic discourse of allyship that was briefly introduced in Chapter One. Specifically, I will draw out and discuss three themes from the allyship literature (as identified in my hypothesis) that a Butlerian analysis might challenge, disrupt and/or deepen. These themes are all present within the primary definition of allyship chosen as a working definition for this thesis (Broido, 2000:3), which describes "social justice allies" as "people of a dominant or privileged racial, gender, sexual or other identity who support and seek to further the causes of those who lack such privilege (such as people of colour or LGBT people)". It is because this definition is so broad, and most of the academic literature on allyship is based on different elements stemming from this definition, that I will specifically draw out and discuss three themes emerging from this definition.

The first theme relates to the emphasis on "privileged identity"[66] as a defining positionality for allies (4.2.). In this discussion, I will explain how Butler's concept of "precarity" could offer a framework for allyship that does not depend on a "strong ontology" of the subject, such as underlies the notions of "privileged" and "non-privileged". The theme of "privilege" will therefore be critically investigated by looking at the ontological assumptions ingrained within the subjective theorisation of allyship "identity". The second theme that I will discuss is the notion of "support" (4.3.). The definition of allyship presents "supporting those who lack privilege" as a necessary condition of being an ally. In this section of the chapter, I will elaborate on the ways in which a Butlerian relational understanding of the ally's "support" can broaden its scope and uncover the normative assumptions that are implied by it. The third theme pertains to "action" as implied by the phrase that allies are "seeking to further the causes" of marginalised people. In this final section before the conclusion (4.4.), I show how the social discourse of allyship emphasises the idea that allyship ought to be based on action instead of identity. Butler's discussion on embodied political action can therefore offer a theoretical basis to (re)consider allied action.

4.2. Privilege

This section will discuss the assumptions and implications of the concept "privileged" as it surfaces in the allyship discourse. The emphasis on "privileged" individuals as a marker for allyship membership is one of the most prevalent discussions[67] within contemporary scholarly work on allyship (Carlson, 2019:2; Gray, 2018:9). In Broido's (2000:3) definition of allyship, allies are described as "people of a dominant or privileged racial, gender, sexual or other identity". Thus, by definition, allyship is understood to involve the positionality and behaviour of individuals "with privilege". While it is not often made explicit within the literature, I think most scholars would at least concede that this privilege is contextual. For example, a poor Black man marching against GBV "has privilege" only relative to the issue of patriarchy and

[66] I emphasise "privileged identity" rather than "dominant" only because the term "privilege" is also so widely used within the social discourse, and therefore offers more thematic continuity. Simultaneously I do think that dominance and privilege speak to different dimensions of majority/minority, and power dynamics in general, to the extent that those who are "privileged" were previously or historically dominant and might not remain so explicitly. "Privilege" thereby acknowledges this unearned or even unconscious dominance more clearly.
[67] Specifically, these debates pertain to the tension between identity and positionality and the lack of intersectional approaches when conceptualising what it means to be "privileged".

male privilege. Accordingly, the roles of allies are to offer support, from this place of privilege, towards "those who lack such privilege" in a particular context, namely marginalised people.

In the first subsection (4.2.1.), I will critically discuss the concept of "privilege" by illustrating how the allyship literature and social discourse are reliant on identitarian assumptions that promote a "strong ontology" of the subject. It will be shown how they a) perpetuate an individualist discourse that relies strongly on singular identity models, and b) conflate identity and positionality to one another in ways that serve as a denial of relationality. In the second subsection (4.2.2.), I will argue that Butler's concepts of "precarity" and "precariousness" can disturb the dichotomy between "privileged" and "marginalised" positions inherent in conceptualisations of allyship, and offer a more fruitful alternative to consider allyship as a dynamic positionality. This section will therefore be where I introduce how could subvert the allyship discourse. The conclusions that emerge from this section will therefore support my hypothesis by demonstrating how a more relational understanding of allyship, as a "precarious positionality"[68], can better engage with the "surplus in meaning" that accompanies allyship.

4.2.1. "Allyship is not a noun": Identitarian assumptions within allyship discourse

Phrases such as "allyship is not an identity", and "allyship is a verb not a noun", are common within repertoires of the social allyship discourse.[69] Conversely, the academic discourse often refers to allyship as an identity or a noun within its normative and descriptive explorations. Drawing on this tension, I will uncover some of the identitarian assumptions and tensions that such slogans within the allyship discourse point towards. By the term "identitarian assumptions" I am referring to an understanding of identity or subjecthood that correlates with a "strong ontology" or "sovereign subjectivity" (i.e., a subject that is coherent, transparent to itself and to other subjects, and universal).

i) Reliance on singular identity models

The first assumption that is irrefutably present within the allyship discourse, is the understanding of "privilege" in terms of singular identity models. As Carlson (2019:7) notes, most of the academic literature prioritises a structural analysis of oppression and privilege in

[68] I use the term "precarious positionalities" to indicate that Butler's concept of precarity entails a dynamic positionality. This will be clarified later in this section, but is important to take note of.
[69] For examples, see Kim (2019); King (2018); Pike (2019); Suntrapak (2017); Utt (2013).

allyship by means of a focus on individual-level relationships and ally development.[70] Allyship is therefore considered as either an individualised growth strategy (or "wokeness journey" more colloquially) that involves learning about one's own privilege, or it is considered solely in terms of a compartmentalised perspective of identity that prioritises exclusive accounts of, for example, White allyship or straight allyship. In the case of the latter, there are a multitude of allyship sources that focus exclusively on singular/single-issue "privileged groups" such as White people, men, heterosexual people, and able-bodied individuals. A large majority of allyship texts thus single out different modes of being "privileged" and thereby tend to bracket different "identities" when speaking about allyship. By doing so, these singular identity designators are therefore a reduction of more complex identities, both within and between individuals and alliances.

In my view, this tendency towards singular identity models when considering allyship is a symptom of the broader identitarian assumptions present within its definition. These assumptions can be particularly located within the central construed dichotomy between "privileged/dominant" and "underprivileged/marginalised" groups – which relies strongly on singular identity models. Before I elaborate further upon this claim, it is first necessary to clarify how the term "privilege" is defined. Thereafter I will present some critical remarks.

Gray (2018:9) provides a helpful conceptual overview of how the term "privilege" has been employed within the allyship literature. Privileged groups can be defined as "groups that historically have been, and continue to be, systematically advantaged" (Hardiman, Jackson, & Griffin, 2013; Johnson, 2006; Tatum, 2013 in Gray, 2018:10). McIntosh (1988:10) further described two types of privilege. One type constitutes an unearned advantage that should be granted to everyone regardless of identity – in other words, it should be a basic human right or treatment, but because of the systemic and historical systems of oppression these "privileges" linger in differential ways. For example, if you have never had to worry about being in danger or harmed because of your sexual orientation or gender identity, you have unearned "straight privilege" or "male privilege". And of course, no one should have to worry about being harmed based on sexual orientation or gender identity, therefore these examples expose an unearned advantage because one cannot "deserve" to be (un)harmed. A second type of privilege concerns

[70] The concept of ally development is based on a large body of allyship literature that seeks to identify the phases of development of social justice allies. It is therefore assumed that the motivations to *become* an ally can be categorised alongside the challenges that aspiring allies might face. Ally development models are particularly prevalent within student affairs literature (Edwards, 2006; Nelson, 2016).

conferred dominance that should be completely erased from society. The pay gap[71] is an example of conferred privilege as it explicitly works to economically and structurally benefit men and White people, thereby sustaining the position of dominance (which should be erased from society). These two types of privilege both contribute to systemically advantaged "privileged" groups.

In contrast to this understanding of "privilege", "marginalised" groups refer to "people that historically have been, and continue to be, systematically oppressed" (Gray, 2018:11). The following excerpt (cited in Gray, 2018:12) openly demarcates who qualifies, historically, as "privileged" or "marginalised":

> Privileged groups include Whites; men; Christians; heterosexuals; cisgendered people; people of middle to upper socioeconomic status; adults; and able-bodied individuals. Marginalized groups include the following: people of color; women; transgendered and gender non-conforming people; non-Christian people of faith or no faith; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) individuals; people of low socioeconomic status; minors and the elderly; and people with disabilities. (Hardiman et al., 2013; Tatum, 2013 in Gray, 2018:13)

Following on from these identity markers (that are obviously context specific), it becomes rather evident – despite the insistence by popular slogans that "allyship is not an identity" or a "noun" – that these single-issue, apparently straightforward and externally imposed identity constructions still dictate membership in fairly clear-cut "privileged" or "marginalised" groups, thereby ignoring intersectionality and complexity. Moreover, the talk of privilege and advantage implies a focus on the "having" side of the equation and thus not on the "deprived" or "not-having" side. While this type of discourse might seem to want to change the circumstances and structures of the privileging, it may at the same time work to retain the structures of privilege and simply demand for greater inclusiveness of their workings.

Because the social discourse surrounding allyship is so dynamic, the conversations are becoming increasingly critical of the "singular identity theories" that are prominent within the academic discourse (Carlson, 2019:8). This, in turn, has sparked a growing demand for scholarly work on allyship to become more intersectional (Carlson, 2019:2; Gray, 2018:17). As such, more recent literature within allyship studies takes a more critical stance against the

[71] The gender or racial "pay gap" refers to the average difference between remuneration for workers based on gender or race (PayScale, 2020).

reliance on singular identity theories (e.g., Whiteness studies). As one of these more critical scholars, Gray (2018:19) rightly points out that there are very few sources within the allyship literature that address "the development of an individual as both an ally and an in-group activist, thus overlooking the intersectional nature of anti-oppression activism". Considering this lack, Gray (2018:22) chiefly offers the distinction between "advocacy" and "allyship" as two distinct forms of social justice activism, referring to in-group activism and out-group activism respectively. Therefore, Gray's thesis is that there exists a shortcoming in the literature regarding people who are simultaneously participating in both "allyship" and "advocacy", and who thus, in their positionality, problematise and disrupt the essential dichotomy (the clear boundary between in- and out-group) implied by conventional allyship discourse. An example could be when a straight Black woman advocates against racial and gendered oppression, while simultaneously – in the same protest event – acting as an ally for the LGBT+ community, by placing the latter agenda on the table in the midst of the struggle for Black women's rights. She is then not only participating in (and showing solidarity with) her in-group, but acting as a voice in support of, in particular, Black people – who are often excluded or marginalised, possibly even within the in-group, but also in the larger society, on the basis of their sexuality. As ally, she is advocating for taking that form of exclusion and marginalisation as seriously as the forms of exclusion that Black women in general suffer from. The one dilemma with "privilege" as one binary marker for allyship is, therefore, that it fails to recognise or take into account moments where people who are both privileged and marginalised in intersecting ways are participating in allyship and/or advocacy.

Therefore, the broad categorisation of allies within its widely accepted definition as "privileged individuals" in terms of singular identity theories brings into question various aspects and tensions related to identity politics and the call for intersectionality. These tensions speak to a larger debate regarding the essentialist tendencies within the type of identity politics that seems to underlie most mainstream understandings of allyship. This is especially so when group experiences, such as those relating to "privileged" or "marginalised" groups, are presumed to be homogenous, e.g., there is an assumption that all White people are middle or upper class, or inversely, that all Black people are in the lower classes. In this instance, there is an assumption that people in a site of privilege are all positioned similarly and share similar experiences over a lifetime. Singular identity theories are therefore often critiqued for "failing to recognize the shifting, multiple, and unstable nature of subjectivity" (Ellsworth, 1989; Weiler, 2001), and thus also of misconceiving the phenomenon of allyship.

ii) Conflating identity and positionality

The second identitarian assumption present within the marker of allies as "privileged" is the way in which the term often conflates positionality with identity, even within explicitly constructivist frameworks. The term "positionality" was coined by Linda Martín Alcoff (1997) to describe how identity can be situated within subjective experiences without resorting to essentialist thinking. She describes positionality, specifically with regards to women, as follows:

> [I]dentity is relative to a constantly shifting context, to a situation that includes a network of elements involving others, the objective economic conditions, cultural and political institutions, ideologies, and so on. If it is possible to identify women by their position within this network of relations, then it becomes possible to ground a feminist argument for women, not on a claim that their innate capacities are being stunted, but that their position within the network lacks power and mobility and requires radical change. (ibid.: 349)

Following on from this definition, positionality seems to be a fruitful concept to combat essentialist thinking, while trying to acknowledge the lived experiences stemming from identity constructions, without portraying them as "natural" or "inherent". Therefore, the concept of "positionality", as Alcoff theorised it, considers identity as something that operates contextually. Using "positionality" as a descriptive concept is helpful because it acknowledges the historical construction of identity as always context-specific within a larger network that is constantly in flux. In contrast, the allyship literature, especially those texts that employ the concept of "privilege", seem to substitute given or stable identity for contextual and dynamic, even ambiguous, positionality. As Gray (2018:48) explains, identity dictates membership in one (and only one) of two binary and mutually exclusive groups, namely, the privileged and marginalised groups.

After "recognising" their membership in only one of either a privileged or marginalised group, individuals are presented with a stark choice between either participating in (in-group) advocacy to end oppression for a community in which they have membership, or participating in (out-group) allyship in order to end oppression for a community in which they do not.[72] The

[72] I am reminded of a logic which played out in Afrikaner politics and in the Fallist movements alike: those who claim they belong most authentically to the in-group start to accuse all "others" of being outsiders, and so the "authentic core" of the in-group steadily shrinks, due to numerous criteria being invented in order to "other" people who could, on the face of it, have belonged to the in-group, but who oppose some aspects of the in-group's politics. For example, you might be White, Protestant and have grown up within the Afrikaans culture, but you

following example reveals how absurd this choice is, between being either "privileged" or "marginalised". Consider a young White man who grew up with a single mother during Apartheid South Africa. They were White (i.e., privileged), but she was discriminated against in jobs and in society because she was a woman, and a single mother. Consequently, he suffered because of the discrimination against her (rendering him marginalised based on both low socioeconomic status and being a minor). When he allies himself now with feminist issues, is he an ally or an advocate? Does his "male privilege" disqualify him from directly experiencing the gendered discrimination faced by his mother? It is in this instance that "privileged positionalities" become conflated with the much more static and essentialist notion of "identity", because the former is often presented as something that you either have or don't have, in an absolute way – and it is therefore a complete erasure of the insights of intersectionality, and the dynamics (often interlaced with power relations and contestations) of group formation. In the South African context, this erasure of complexities caused by fixed notions of privilege is noticeable in, for example, how "brown" people are sometimes included (and include themselves) under the Black political alliance, and sometimes feel excluded from it (or exclude themselves from it).

Beyond the denial of intersectionality that stems from setting up the privileged/marginalised dichotomy in terms of identity instead of positionality, there is also the problematic assumption that one can "identify" oneself as an ally. The existing discourse surrounding "ally development"[73] exposes this problematic. For example, Edwards (2006:47) attempted to provide a conceptual model for "ally identity development". This model illustrates the ways in which allies can "develop" from allyship based on self-interest, towards altruism, and then finally to become "allies for social justice". The notion that allyship can be developed as an "identity" assumes that there is an innate or distinctive mode of "being an ally" that can attain (by following certain steps or phases).

While there is an acknowledgement by Edwards (2006:49) that these phases do not necessarily

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are not a proper/real Afrikaner if you do not support "our" political/cultural agenda. Similarly, in #FeesMustFall: you might be Black and have a Black history and experience, but if you question "our" exclusions/forms of protest, you are a coconut, and not a real African/Black/Revolutionary. These very speculative, yet commonly used, examples illustrate, for me, some of the dangers of simplistic demarcations.

[73] To some extent, it does makes sense to focus on how one becomes an ally with a certain political sensibility and disposition, because such political stances are obviously not given with identities such as "having privilege". Yet, the allyship discourse often neglects to acknowledge that the in-group activist's politics are also not simply a natural given within their identity or even positionality. And this point is rarely acknowledged within ally development models.

occur in a linear fashion, the process is still presented within individualistic identity origins, and therefore neglects to acknowledge that we are, as Butler would say, always already implicated in relational and interdependent ways of being. I therefore maintain that attempts to concretise allyship as an identity that can be developed are based upon identitarian and essentialist assumptions, which could have been avoided if "positionality" (especially as theorised by Alcoff) were used as a descriptive concept instead.[74]

Moreover, the identitarian assumption that you can "become" an ally also speaks to the broader problematic related to "self-identifying" as allies. On the one hand, this problematic entails the idea that allyship is not something one can claim for oneself. In relation to this idea, Crosby (2018) notes that the act of labelling or declaring oneself as an "ally" to others "without their consent or invitation" disregards their sense of agency in a paternalistic way. Moreover, Crosby also points out that "self-appointed" allies take on allyship as an individualistic project, and thereby fail to engage in dialogue or forge communal bonds. Crosby (2018) therefore presents allyship as something that should be externally ascribed to someone, and not just by anyone – it must be ascribed by the in-group. However, I would argue that even "ascribing ally identity to another" is equally reliant on fixed/coherent notions of allyship as an identity, instead of a relationally situated positionality. Thus, when you "identify" someone as an ally in terms of a descriptive identity marker, it still perpetuates the idea that you can "become an ally" as long as someone else acknowledges when you reach so-called "ally status". The identitarian assumptions of allyship therefore linger within the social discourse, and I argue that this tendency can be attributed to the academic literature that framed allyship as an "identity" in the first place.

In conclusion, the allyship literature, as well as social discourse, seems to perpetuate a "strong ontology" of the subject. By explicitly focusing the narrative of allies as either with or without privilege, we become trapped in, distracted from, or blinded to, "the social relationships and conditions that constructed privilege in the first place" (Tien, 2019:539). An implication of this problematic might be that privileged positionalities remain reinforced and maintained through its ritual performance (even in negation). Therefore, Tien (2019:540) also warns against the

[74] As another example, Standpoint Theory as coined by Harding (1991) makes clear how there is a gap and thus a need for work bridging between lived experiences (of, say, racial oppression) and a theory/political position that activates or mobilises those lived experiences. In particular, there is work to be done to build a communal politics and a shared perspective based on shared patterns of positionality that flow from similar (but never identical) experiences.

danger of reducing privilege to a binary identity, instead of a social process or relationship. Moreover, by conflating "privileged positionality" with singular identity models, the allyship discourse becomes individuated to the extent that it risks erasing the structural and institutionalised ways in which historical and collective understandings of social locations have come into being. And the denial of this relational understanding might prevent some of the more nuanced and malleable forms of solidarity from surfacing and being recognised as such. For example, by purely focusing on the singular Black identity as either marginalised or privileged, the intricate dynamics between African American women of colour and Black African women (or even White women born in Africa) might be neglected. And as such, pertinent questions surrounding the opportunities for allyship from the West towards Africa, or more generally the relationship between Africa and the West; or the intra-group dynamics of different women in Africa and possibilities for coalitions, might remain uninterrogated.

I therefore argue that because notions of "privilege" are a) ingrained within the discourse of singular identity models (i.e., White privilege, straight privilege, thin privilege), and b) are presented as an identity instead of a positionality (resulting in a fixed dichotomy, i.e., you either have it or you don't), it neglects to acknowledge "textured realities" that include being privileged in some instances and marginalised in others. With these ideas in mind, I wish to now move on to consider how Butler's "precarious" politics might serve to destabilise the identitarian assumptions within mainstream understandings of allyship.

4.2.2. Towards Butler's "precarious" positionalities

While singular identity theories, often employed within the allyship discourse, might be a useful starting place to consider identity, they are also severely limited, and fail to account for the multiple, dynamic, interconnected and intersectional dimensions of identity, as I have discussed above. Moreover, by often substituting identity for positionality, the allyship discourse is also guilty of furthering essentialist tendencies that depend on conceptions of sovereign selfhood. With the above mentioned in mind, I aim to show how we can re-conceive of allyship through Butler's strongly relational, embodied and precarious understanding of the self.

I suggested previously that "positionality", as theorised by Alcoff (1997), offers a more dynamic and context-specific alternative to singular identity models. In this section, I will show how Butler's concept of precarity also involves a dynamic positionality. In this way, I argue

that Butler offers a distinct "precarious" positionality. This is because I think that Butler's concepts of "precarity" and "precariousness" is more conducive to relational thinking and might do a better job of conceptualising the different parties involved in the allied relationship. In doing so, I maintain that Butler's theoretical framework associated with her notion of "precarity" offers a better understanding of allyship than the "privilege" vs "marginalised" dichotomy characterising the allyship literature. This argument will be presented by focusing on how i) Butler links precarity with performativity, thereby making it more intersectional, and how ii) the relationship between "precarity" and "precariousness" is more dynamic and fruitful than the privilege/marginalised dichotomy.

It is also necessary to mention at the start of this particular analysis of "precarity" that Butler's "precarious" (dis)positions are certainly not immune to critique. Because the impetus of my study is to see how the allyship discourse can benefit from Butler's thinking, I do not set out to address Butler's shortcomings in-depth. However, I will integrate some of my critical considerations within this discussion and application of the concept of "precarity" to the question of allyship, during which some problematic assumptions of precarity will emerge.

i) Precarity, performativity and positionality as intersectional categories

The first reason why I consider the concept of "precarity" to be a more fruitful alternative for theorising allyship than the identitarian understanding of allyship, is because I maintain that "precarity" is also theorised as a positionality rather than an identity. Based on a similar post-foundational thinking to Alcoff's notion of "positionality" (and subject formation more generally), Butler also examines identity construction within its larger "network of relations" instead of its supposedly innate qualities. Positionalities therefore emphasise context-specific, fluid and dynamic modes of being situated, or positioned, based on identity constructions. And as such, the concept of "precarity" is more closely aligned with a fluid positionality that still acknowledges the "lived experiences" of existing power imbalances. The "success" of alliances, especially ones that include allies in the conventional understanding of the term, therefore also depends on how various "bodies in alliance" position themselves. In other words, it is important to acknowledge the significance of both precarity and performativity in terms of how, as an aspiring ally, you position your body, voice and general contribution within the alliance – whether you do it in a way that subverts the power imbalance that you protest and oppose, or rather repeat it, thereby performatively contradicting your supposed support, and bringing the oppressive logic to operate inside the communal protesting body.

In *Notes*, Butler does not make use of the terms "privilege" or "marginalised" as descriptive concepts within her understanding of alliances. Instead, Butler proposes that all the members of alliances are precarious. Considering precarity as a positionality in Butlerian terms also involves embracing the alternative ontological position that is entailed by "The Butlerian Subject" (as in-process, discursive, performative and opaque), as discussed in 2.3.2. In this way, precariousness as a (shared) positionality does not depend on sovereign subjectivity or singular understandings of identity because it affirms fluidity, interdependency, differential power relations and being opaque to oneself. Instead, Butler encourages coalitions or alliances based on differentially shared experiences of precarity, thereby making precarity the "middle term" that connects a spectrum of people in need of a more liveable life together (as discussed in the previous chapters).

Whereas the identitarian assumptions of "singular identity models" emphasise individualised and stable identity constructions, as well as sovereign (and self-transparent) action and motivations for action, Butler's notion of "precarity" as a positionality exposes not just instances of power, but also broader relations of power. The emphasis on how people are "differentially precarious" or might incur disproportionate exposure to violence or injury in various ways, therefore places the relation to power and discursive subject formation at the centre of understanding Butler's "precarious positionalities". As mentioned in Chapter Three of this study, Butler (2015:148) clearly links the relational aspect of the body to the fact that "the body never exists in an ontological mode that is distinct from its historical situation". This historical situation therefore also refers to how discursive histories shape the contextual situation. Furthermore, by framing who "counts" as "precarious" as a question of "who counts as recognisable as a subject", Butler (2015:69) allows for the answer to take into account that people shift around on the spectrum over time, depending on the context, or the amount of people who seek to destabilise the norms that rendered some precarious in the first instance.

In terms of performativity, Butler (1990:xv) reminds us that "everyday actions routinely reproduce pre-existing positionalities, giving them a durability that seemingly naturalises them". However, these "pre-existing positionalities" remain social constructs that are subject to transformation, and everyday habitual actions can be changed. Any particular situated understanding of subjecthood can therefore be contested, disrupted, illuminated and renegotiated. During acts of protest, there is thus also a social, political, and spatial negotiation within modes of assembling or forming alliances. The fact that Butler links the concept of

performativity with precarity, especially within acts of public assembly, therefore opens up the ability to consider the specific ways in which allied action is also performative. In Butlerian terms, the goal of allyship would be to performatively destabilise the norms that induce precarity. To ally with another therefore implies an attempt to fight against the norms that you are also embodying and, as such, to "perform" allyship is therefore to critically undo and subvert forms of "normative violence".

Moreover, the concept of differential precarity also tacitly includes the prism of intersectionality that needs to be accounted for within allyship or solidarity work. This works toward countering, on the one hand, the dichotomisation of the positions of "ally" and "marginalised/oppressed",[75] and on the other, a simple conflation of their positions, which would effectively erase the rich and ambivalent position of the ally (as much as, I would say, the so-called in-group activist). Intersectional tensions within in-groups also render everyone on the inside at least potentially precarious vis-à-vis the group itself, as we have seen in #FeesMustFall or the example of the human shield. Thus, Butler's concept of "precarity" as a positionality is able to challenge the dichotomous thinking of allyship as an identity because it is entangled with the Butlerian subject that accounts for discourse, shifting contexts and intersectionality – all of them related irrevocably to various shades and textures of precarity. However, Butler's concept of precarity is also more than just a positionality – it is a concept that includes a deep sense of relationality and embodiment. And this is why I think it offers such a unique and powerful contribution to the allyship discourse.

ii) *Positionality of "precarity" & "precariousness" as dynamic*

As I argued in section 4.2.1., the privileged vs marginalised dichotomy is based on identitarian assumptions. I believe that Butler's notions of "precarity" and "precariousness" offer an alternative model to consider the matrix of oppression. Specifically, I claim in this current sub-section that the relation between "precarity" and "precariousness" is more productive than the privileged/marginalised dichotomy because the former two concepts are, by definition, implicated within one another. In other words, I regard the relation between "precarity" and "precariousness" to be a non-dualism, or a more unified model to consider the relationship

[75] This is the sense in which Butler seemingly dissolves the concept of allyship altogether. In contrast, the allyship discourse that relentlessly repeats this dichotomy as a precondition for allyship might itself become guilty of the same performative contradiction: if you see a kind of stable, even permanent, privilege as the precondition for allyship, then you reinscribe the dichotomy as a hierarchical dichotomy (e.g., male over female) every time you use the very term ally, thereby ironically reinforcing privilege and power.

between supposed "allies" and "those in need of allyship" (beyond the already established points raised in the previous section).

It might thus be helpful to recall how Butler views "precariousness" as a generalisable condition that is shared by all, whereas "precarity" refers to the differential allocation of "precariousness". Thus, on the one hand, the general ontological precariousness of the ally is a good starting point to acknowledge what is shared. This is because the shared "precariousness" emphasise how we are not only implicated and complicit with the precarity of each other, but also how this interdependency – on an embodied level – opens up the capacity for empathy. And moreover, Butler considers precarity as "induced" and "differential". This accounts for the fact that the "differential" distribution of precarity renders some more, and some less, precarious in dynamic and ductile ways. And moreover, those who are less precarious also always and inevitably live (knowingly or unknowingly) in a general situation of "precariousness", which implicates them relationally on the basic ontological level. This insight also implies an almost Levinasian obligation or demand to become an "ally" because we are all ontologically implicated in the injustice before we even become aware of it.

On the other hand, the ally is also connected to the "induced precarity" to the extent that they do not have to experience the "unliveability" or "struggle with the norms". And yet those who do not live the unliveability directly benefit (possibly unknowingly) from the unliveability experienced by others. As an example, the "privilege" or "advantage" of the able-bodied is the other side of the coin of the disregard/neglect/discomfort of disabled bodies. Or, at least, this is what a relational ontology would imply. This insight further exposes another failure of the privileged/marginalised dichotomy. The dichotomous thinking neglects to point out how those who are "privileged" are also implicated within those who are "marginalised". It could also be formulated as follows: those who are "less precarious" in any particular situation have more "liveable lives" and are by implication considered "grievable". They usually do not have to "struggle with the norm" within the given context.

However, those who do not have to "struggle with the norm" remain implicated within those norms, even if it is by virtue of "not struggling". Similarly, those who do "struggle with the norm" are also, by implication, in relation to those who "do not struggle with the norm". For example, "white privilege" is not separate from the system that marginalises Black people. Therefore, if a White person were to think of "white privilege" as purely an individual "struggle", they might neglect to recognise how this "privilege" informs and maintains the

oppression of a Black person (and of course this example remains the same in more intersectional scenarios as well).

Following a similar line of thought, Lloyd (2015:224) also uses Butler's notion of precarity to question whether it leaves ethical obligations for those who are less precarious. She asks: "What is it that disposes subjects, especially those constituted as protected or valued subjects, to ethical responsiveness? [...] What enables the other to recognise as 'human' a person who was previously invisible to them as such?" In the case of my previous example, one might ask what it is that enables someone who benefits from racial hierarchies and injustice to confront and destabilise them? Or, why would someone with citizenship and a home advocate for refugees? Is it solely because of an ethical obligation that those who are less precarious respond? It seems to be that this is not the case. Indeed, it is not only because of something removed from oneself, i.e., a call to charity, that one should respond. Rather, I think it is the case that those who are "privileged" or "less precarious" are also more clearly and concretely implicated in the plight of the "marginalised" or "precarious" other.

I think that Butler's dual understanding of vulnerability[76] (as discussed in 3.2.2.) might give us a clue towards engaging with Lloyd's questions. By showing how vulnerability in terms of "precariousness" can be mobilised to combat the differential exposure of precarity, Butler emphasises that "what is shared" relationally implicates us to respond to "how it is shared differentially". "Precarity" therefore emphasises what we share, namely, constitutive vulnerability and relationality, as well as what separates/distinguishes us (induced precarities) – which is the double condition that makes allyship both possible and an ethical necessity.

In Butler's discussion on alliances, she used the "paradox of plural performativity" (explained in section 3.2.1) to illustrate how precarity and performativity are interconnected. The question underlying this paradox was "how can the precarious act without making themselves more precarious?" Or, "how can you publicly demand support, without having that support?" I think it is worthwhile to also consider the other side of this paradox in terms of allyship and responsiveness. Perhaps it can be phrased as "how can you offer support, when the conditions that gave you that ability to support are in part responsible for withholding support from more precarious others?"

[76] Namely, vulnerability as the sense of exposure implied by precarity, and vulnerability as something that can be mobilised on the basis of a shared sense of precariousness (or general dependency on the other).

The "surplus in meaning" of allied action therefore often resides in these inverted moments of plural performative action, where you are combatting something in which you share a sense of being complicit. For example, an ally might actively combat racism within a protest space and still be guilty of certain racist microaggressions that are deeply ingrained within the system they seek to oppose. And at the same time, I think Butler would not say this immediately disqualifies the aspiring ally, precisely because we are not transparent to ourselves. And part of our relationality and precariousness means that we are tied up and invested in power and discursive structures long before we even become conscious of them. Thus, learning about them is an endless process, and not only for the "ally" – but also for the "in-group activist".

Simply put, to say that every subject is generally exposed to vulnerabilities which render them interdependent (on others and on systems) in a myriad of ways, offers an understanding of the relationship between people who are precarious in different ways. And this understanding implicates them relationally. Beyond this constitutive ontological relationship stemming from Butler's "precarious" positionality, I will now move to uncover some of the ethical assumptions within the allyship discourse as it manifests within the concept of "support".

4.3. Support

The definition of allyship under discussion presents "supporting those who lack privilege" as a necessary condition for being considered an ally. If allyship refers to "acting in support" of marginalised others, then it is implied that, first and foremost, there is a moral/ethical obligation "to support marginalised others". Even at a glance there is an overwhelming amount of social media/online content that aims at guiding the ways in which allies can offer "support" to those who are marginalised. These guidelines on "how to ally" advocates for general principles such as "act out of responsibility, not guilt"; "listen more and speak less"; "do not talk about your White guilt"; and "constantly check your privilege" (Utt, 2018).[77] If these principles are representative of allyship, or being a good ally, then it would be of value to determine which factors ought to be considered as constitutive of the distinctive ethical "obligations" that allies – as a less precarious positionality – hold. However, I will show how such a project might

[77] Of course, these suggestions may be helpful and productive in many instances and have contributed to concrete ways of countering oppression. In this regard, my goal in discussing the "normative assumptions" within allyship is not to make my own normative claims surrounding them, i.e., to make moral judgements on the specific suggestions, or even to give suggestions or guidelines of my own. Instead, I go deeper and show how the meta-level conceptualisations of these claims are implicated within normative and sovereign thinking in a potentially problematic or self-refuting way.

continue to perpetuate normative thinking that supports sovereign subjectivity, and thereby undermines relational thinking.

In this section, I argue that the abundance of these resources on how to offer "support" is indicative of various normative assumptions that have not been interrogated. I am therefore interested in exploring how Butler's relational ethics, as discussed in the previous chapters, might help to flesh out the type of (normative) justifications for duties of support implied by the existing allyship discourse. This will be achieved by firstly identifying and elaborating on the normative assumptions of allyship (4.3.1.). Based on these normative assumptions, I will illustrate how Butler's relational ethics can offer a more intricate alternative (4.3.2.).

4.3.1. "10 ways to be a better ally": Normative assumptions within allyship discourse

My discussion on the normative assumptions within the allyship discourse will revolve around: (i) the prevalence of discourse that distinguishes "good vs bad" allyship, which results in principle-based guidelines, and ii) the narrow understanding of support, as two prominent/key themes within both the academic and social discourse.

i) The myth of good vs bad allyship

One of the most apparent normative assumptions within the allyship discourse is the differentiation between "good" and "bad" allyship. A large number of the allyship guidelines explicitly operate within various binaries such as "better" or "worse" and "true" or "false" allies.[78] Moreover, these guidelines, or precise steps that one can take, offer help in shifting from being a bad ally to a good one. While it is certainly possible to consider more and less successful examples of allyship, the problem with the binary of good vs bad types of allyship is that it assumes that there are concrete ways of distinguishing between good and bad examples of allyship that can be universally applied. This approach furthers dichotomous and disembodied, decontextualised, and atomizing modes of thinking, as if good and bad allyship are both independent of our constitutive relationality.

It is therefore my observation that the conversations that centre "good" vs "bad" allyship become caught up within principle-based approaches as an underlying ethical framework. Particularly to evaluate concrete instances of allyship as either successful or unsuccessful.

[78] These binaries are clearly noticeable in article titles such as, for example, "The Difference Between a Helpful and Harmful Ally" (Alcala, 2020).

More recently, terms such as "virtue signalling", "surface level activism" (also known as "slacktivism"), "optical allyship" and "performative allyship" started to emerge as concepts that can account for the many different ways in which these cases of "bad allyship" can take shape (Jennings, 2020). These forms of "bad allyship" therefore describe ways of actively involving oneself in protest while *not* being *supportive*.

I will briefly discuss the concept of "performative allyship" as one example that illustrates how a principle-based approach to "bad allyship" might fall short. "Performative allyship" is defined as occurring "when someone from a non-marginalised group expresses their support for a marginalised group in a way that is not helpful, or even harmful to the marginalised group" (Phillips, 2020). The main problem raised with these acts of supposed allyship, that range from being "unsupportive" to harmful, is that they draw attention to the "performer" of allyship, in such a way that they further harm, or place additional burdens on, the marginalised group, thereby perpetuating the oppressive/pre-existing power imbalances. Furthermore, "performative allies" are often accused of "virtue signalling"[79] – described as the habit of conspicuously expressing one's moral virtue merely by "expressing disgust or favour for certain political ideas or cultural happenings" (Bartholomew, 2015). These types of allyship therefore likely involve or express the ally's need to ease guilt, increase social capital, "check the box" or to seek rewards from others, without actively risking the ally's position of "privilege".

While I am sympathetic towards the need to critically evaluate different strategies of supporting precarious others, I am also cautious of the direction that the so-called "allyship Olympics" of constantly evaluating individuated attempts of allyship takes us. My reason for caution is based on the commonly held assumption that those who are evaluating or discerning between "good or bad" allies are presumed to be homogeneous. When, for example, it is assumed that as soon as one person of colour problematises an act of allyship, it implies that all Black people might find it problematic, thereby reducing people of colour to a homogeneous group in an attempt to justify the occurrence of "bad allyship".

To this extent, the caution against "performative allyship" brings another question to the forefront. Firstly, when is allyship intervention successful? And secondly, who is to decide?

[79] A term coined by James Bartholomew (2015) in the article "Easy Virtue: Saying the right things violently on Twitter is much easier than real kindness".

Intuitively, within the existing parameters of allyship, it would make sense to infer that "marginalised" (or precarious) groups ought to dictate the success of the support. However, as explicated previously, this would assume a homogenous and harmonious understanding of marginalised groups, and a level of transparency of (both individual and collective) self and others that is unattainable in a Butlerian world.

My point is therefore that the principled approach to allyship is not productive because it neglects to recognise the internal ambiguities that necessarily and always operate within spaces of allyship and alliances – starting with the uneasy alliance one forms with oneself when deciding to engage in public protest. For example, some of these principles on "how to ally" note that to be a good/ethical ally one should 1) listen; 2) acknowledge your privilege; 3) educate yourself; and 4) act on behalf of marginalised others. However, "acting on behalf of others" could still lead to embodied misinterpretations or actions intended as allyship that perpetuate power imbalances. By embodied misinterpretations, I am referring to both a higher-level hermeneutical problem (where meaning is never immediately understood), as well as a very concrete example of misreading body language. For example, you might interpret an in-group activist's distressed expression in a confrontational situation as a need for you to step in or speak up, however, the in-group activist might in turn interpret this as a forceful act of reinscribing dominance. Similarly, merely "listening" and "staying silent" might not be productive within all contexts. Therefore, it is possible to "adhere" to all these principles and still miss "the ethical call" that is demanded by the specific context (based on a person's positionality and constitutive relationality). The salient point here is that because allyship is per definition relational, reciprocal, context-bound, embodied, performative, communicative, and therefore deeply layered with unavoidable ambiguities and uneasy alliances, any principle-based or deontological approach to its practice is bound to fail.

Beyond the problems identified above with setting up the false dichotomy between good versus bad allies, there is also a second normative assumption that stems from the allyship discourse. The next section will discuss how the principled approach to allyship provide an overly narrow understanding of how allies can be "in support" of precarious others.

ii) Narrow understandings of support

The discourse surrounding "support" seems to circle around "how allies can be of support", without considering the implicit assumptions regarding what it means to be supportive. One

such unexamined assumption concerns the assumed relationship between being, acting, and supporting. As I mentioned in section 4.2.1., allyship based on being has the potential of assuming a sovereign subjectivity that implies an innate form of "being" an ally, understood in identitarian terms. I discussed the multiple problems associated with this kind of understanding. The allyship discourse is moreover self-contradictory to the extent that it advocates for "allyship as a verb and not a noun" while at the same time treating allyship as a noun or identity. In other words, there is a push for allyship to be defined in terms of active participation in terms of support, or "action", but then good allied action is framed as *being* a good ally – this amounts to an empty circularity. Moreover, these descriptive accounts of action also imply that the only way in which allies can concretely offer support (be good allies) is via action.

Perhaps it is worthwhile to reflect on the difference between "support" and "action". While action might be a form of support, support does not revolve exclusively around "ways of acting". This is because some support could be offered more passively or indirectly. For example, infrastructural support cannot consciously be "acted", but it can be offered or improved[80].

Commonly referenced examples of how allies can support others are "donating money", "educating yourself", "standing in solidarity", or "speaking up to injustices". These examples speak to different and complex dimensions of support. To educate oneself about discursive subject formations as a form of support could be considered a vital precondition for "standing in solidarity" or "speaking up to injustices". Similarly, providing support in terms of monetary contributions that can potentially improve precarious environments does imply a more relational understanding of how one can minimise precarity. However, all of these distinctive modes of support are not developed any further within the allyship literature beyond the oversaturated "10 ways that you can be of support" content. Therefore, I argue that the failure to engage more with the implicit intricacies of "support" end up limiting the rich variety of ways in which allies could be of support, as understood within a broader relational ethics. In the next section, I will show how Butler's understanding of support could bridge this gap.

4.3.2. Towards a Butlerian "ethics of allyship"

[80] And similarly, not all action entails a clear form of support. For example, it is possible that one can act to take away conditions of support, or act in ways that make some mor precarious.

It has been established within the previous section that the normative assumptions within the allyship discourse perpetuate the type of "normative ethics" (based on a strong ontology) that Butler critiques. These approaches lead to blunt analytic instruments: dichotomous, stable and simplistic categorisations into "good" and "bad" allies, and an overly narrow understanding of ally support. In this section, I will illustrate how Butler can help us to expand upon the notion of "support" by i) emphasising the significance of discursive norms in relation to ethics; ii) relationally considering our ethical "call" to support those who are precarious; and iii) by extending our understanding of the broader networks that can offer or require support (e.g. supporting conditions of public assembly, embodied protest and action, infrastructure and basic needs such as shelter and sustenance). These three points will establish that Butler's relationality presents an ethic of allyship that can expand on what an understanding of "support" might resemble. By implication, this alternative understanding of "support" allows for a much more subtle set of distinctions between better and/or worse expressions of allyship (and alliance in precarity) to emerge.

i) Questioning the "norms" in "normative"

Given Butler's consistent resistance towards the temptation of presenting a clear and concise "how to" when it comes to politics and ethics, I think it is reasonable to infer that she would also challenge this aspect within the current allyship discourse. Butler's primary concern might be that principle-based ethics tend to position individual deliberation at the core of moral action – instead of, and thereby displacing, her emphasis on relationality.

Once again, the Broido definition[81] of allyship is a good example of how ontology, ethics and politics are mutually implicated and entangled with one another. Because this definition of allyship heavily depends upon a "strong ontology", or individualistic notions of identity and moral agency (as explicated in the section 4.2.1.), it also implies a "normative" injunction that centres around individual obligations, or hypothetical "ought" questions. Similarly to Butler's (and Levinas's) strong rejection of any fundamental ethics based on universal principles, I would also like to suggest that an "ethics of allyship" will not be productive if it is thought of merely in terms of the "principles" that the social discourse prescribes. In fact, I think that the social discourse is in fact gesturing towards more complex relational claims surrounding

[81] "People of a dominant or privileged racial, gender, sexual or other identity who support and seek to further the causes of those who lack such privilege (such as people of colour or LGBT people)" (Broido, 2000:3).

allyship, but is stuck within the lexicon of normative ethics – and Butler can thus help to expand and enrich the ethical vocabulary of the allyship discourse.

Butler's understanding of ethics as inextricably connected to norms helps us to understand that no "normative" or "ought" questions can be separated from the social norms that govern them. For example, questions surrounding how allies can be of support to others cannot be separated from the normative dimensions that made their ability to "support" others possible. The fact that men can be allies in support of feminism cannot be separated from the salient point that men are also consciously or unconsciously participating or benefiting from the patriarchal order. I would like to recall in this instance Butler's ethical concept of "normative violence". As I mentioned previously, Butler (2004:21) insists that attention ought to be paid to "norms that make life livable in some bodies and unliveable in others". Normative language can therefore culturally re-produce subordination and oppression. I also used the example of the heterosexual matrix to explain how normative violence operates. In the case of allyship, supporting the LGBT+ community would therefore entail a larger understanding of the ally's own (even unconscious) complicities in perpetuating "normative violence". And of course, the in-group activists are shaped equally by this normative violence. Butler therefore provides a vocabulary to consider ways of destabilising norms and their effects as an integral part of offering support. And I would add that "support" without such destabilisation is counterproductive.

Because Butler's ethical subject can only emerge through social norms, the ethical encounter itself is made possible by who can appear on the "normative horizon". Thus, sociality is important to ethics to the extent that the question of "responsibility" is based on how we can rethink the social constitution of the subject (Lloyd, 2015:225). Instead of asking, in the first place, "How can I be of support to the other?", rather, the more central ethical question would be, "How are we formed within social life, and at what cost?" (Butler, 2005:139). So, part of understanding "support" more relationally is to bring forth the allied relationship as having precedence over the ethical obligations that follow. Of course, Butler argues that social constitution of the subject (that happens prior to our appearance within normative horizons) happens largely outside of our conscious minds and self-understanding, whereas the primacy of the allyship relationship might be positioned as a conscious choice, or something that happens voluntarily. However, I nonetheless think Butler would argue that the allied relationship would be the logical outcome when the ethical relationship takes precedence over

obligations more generally. In other words, a relational account of ethics (as opposed to deontology), through its ontological dependency and account of responsibility, tacitly includes the ethical call to minimise the precarity. And this is just another way of formulating the project of allyship (as minimising the precarity of differentially precarious others).

Moreover, Butler's ethical relationality might also maintain that considering "support" within a matrix of "success" versus "failure" fails to make room for the uneasy alliances where we are "bound to each other, in spite of ourselves" (Butler, 2015:108). In this way, the individualistically oriented normative preoccupations largely erase prior social and historical constitutions, implications and complicities and assume a kind of innocent ally with no historical context. To this extent, the normative preoccupation with "better" or "worse" ways of practicing allyship might be a symptom of the broader failure to engage with the ambiguities of allyship, which is undermined by dichotomous thinking. And these ambiguities can be better understood when the notion of doing and undoing of norms in relation to the other is emphasised (as opposed to that of success/failure). Thus, any descriptive account of the kind of obligations required by allyship cannot precede the relationship that will be forged within the alliance itself, but rather flow from it. And Butler reminds us that our ontological condition of being given over to each other, or being undone by another, results in our inability to attain "any moral idea of a self-directed, rationally motivated and wholly self-knowing agent" (Mills, 2015:2). In this way, Butler's relational thinking also obscures any self-directed attempt of understanding yourself as a self-ware ally capable of controlling or pre-empting (ethical) acts of support. Instead, ethical moments of alliance and allyship occur in the space between the self another.

ii) Recognising the ethical call

Based on this ethical relationship that privileges norms, Butler also emphasises the ability to recognise the call to ethics as a vital component of our responsibility of "supporting" the other. In this regard, Mills (ibid.:11) reminds us that Butler's conception of responsibility is not so much a theory of responsibility as it is a suggestion for how responsibility can be theorised. This is evident in the emphasis that Butler places on the manner in which we ought to think of the relationship between responsibility and responsiveness, and the way in which relationality in the ontological sense precedes responsibility in the ethical sense. Butler does not give a "how to", she provides a "how come" or "how ought we to".

Butler's emphasis on the ethical call as a helpful way to consider responsibility for the other is also encapsulated in her understanding of the opaque subject. In many ways, I think allies and in-group activists are expected by the allyship discourse to give an (complete) account of themselves in order to justify certain actions. And of course, the attempt of giving an account is vital, however, it is problematic when taking responsibility comes with the expectation of being either blame- or praiseworthy, depending on the account given by the ally.

The ethical relationship implicit in allyship therefore also speaks to Butler's (2005) notion of "giving an account of oneself". However, as I mentioned before, the possibility to give an account is inevitably limited for Butler, so that one "always and necessarily fails to give a complete account" (Mills, 2015:12). This common expectation expressed in allyship discourse, which expects of allies to "give an account" of their "ethical support", is iterated in phrases such as "to be a good ally, you should check your privilege". While this phrase more generally presents an invitation to critically revaluate one's relation to social norms (or privileged positionality), the phrase is also presented as a call to allies to evaluate and understand the various ways in which allies might unknowingly benefit from unearned and systemic privileges. However, the idea of "checking yourself" also assumes a high degree of self-transparency, as if one's subjective and cognitive involvement in the social norms that co-constituted one's existence is neatly laid out in some inner recess of one's own mind.

So, while the work of allyship rightfully involves learning about one's own privilege as a mechanism to actively oppose structures from which you systematically benefit, a Butlerian analysis would also add that this "privileged self" is also necessarily and inevitably opaque to itself in ways that are likely to infiltrate the ethical relationship. At the same time, neither the precarious individual themselves, nor the prior "alliance" between those within the so-called "in-group", can escape this same logic. They are also (and equally) opaque to themselves, and cannot fully oversee the extent to which their social selves and positionalities have been shaped by social norms. Thus, part of the "ethical call" for Butler would be to acknowledge this opacity of self and other[82] within the allied relationship itself.

And more so, I would argue that principles of allyship that require "checking your privilege" do not adequately account for the complex nature of ethical obligations towards others, especially within encounters where one cannot fully, adequately or immediately "give an

[82] And the need for alliances within oneself

account". This is especially relevant within protest spaces where one is often confronted with the precarity of others in unexpected ways and "checking that privilege" by yourself might not be possible without an embodied confrontation with another's embodied precarity. The act of the human shield, mentioned in Chapter One, offers a good example. The material realities of police violence against Black bodies as but one site of precarity (which render them more vulnerable to harm) could activate the mobilisation of vulnerability for the allies to offer support on both a physical and symbolic level. This mobilisation was activated by making themselves more vulnerable in the formation of the human shield and thereby subjecting themselves to potential harm. In this way, it was the embodied encounter within the alliance, and not some principle or guideline, that prompted action. Moreover, a relational ethics underscores the idea that meaning is not given, but arises between people, where it can be negotiated and hammered out as it unfolds within the uneasy process of forming alliances and protesting. In this sense, perhaps the question is not about the principles that underlie our ethical obligations as allies, but rather about whether we do in fact respond when a moment for ethics arises. In response to this, Butler (2018) writes that:

> For me, the question of ethics is always a question of an ethical relation, that is, the question of what binds me to another and in what way this obligation suggests that the "I" is invariably implicated in the "we". So when I am called upon to care for another, or indeed, to resist a social condition of inequality… it is not a matter of finding my bearings in my personal morality or my individual disposition. Rather, it is precisely because I am from the start implicated in the lives of the other that "I" is already social, and must begin its reflection and action from the assumption of a constitutive sociality.

This description echoes the idea that the ethical question in allyship is not "How well can you check your own privilege?", but rather "How am I implicated within the precarity (or marginalisation) of others with whom I share a space?" Once again, narratives of privilege emphasise selfhood instead of questioning the dispossession of the precarious other. Butler's relational ethics therefore prepares us to ask the more pertinent ethical question, namely, whether we are able to detect the ethical moment in the first place, the demand that is made upon us, even before we know how to respond. And specifically within the context of allyship, Butler presents a call to reflect on the ways in which we are implicated in each other's social lives. This acts as a starting point to discern the kind of support that might contribute productively to "our constitutive sociality".

A good example that exposes the significance of the ethical moment (or the "ethical call") within allyship is the complexity surrounding the allyship notion of "silence as an action", or inaction as a form of action. Most guidelines on allyship include "staying silent" at certain points, with the aim being to emphasise marginalised voices. At the same time, there is also the idea that one's silence could, in another context or situation be violent, when one chooses not to "use your privilege" to "speak up to" injustice. As Carlson (2018:88) rightfully points out:

> Allies must find a precarious balance between knowing when to take a seat at the table of social justice advocacy, joining those who are oppressed at combating oppression; when to speak up; when to be silent in order to listen to the experiences of others; and when to leave the table altogether, so as not to infringe on or usurp the role of target group members in advocating for their own liberation.

What Carlson touches on is therefore also a hermeneutical complexity in relation to allyship. The ethical ambiguities of allyship that have "surplus in meaning" therefore invites us to recognise that being an ally does not only relate to supporting the other by physically being present, but that it also requires the task of carefully and tactfully pre-empting what certain gestures or acts would come to symbolise within a specific context. Being physically present in a space, appearing there, may not in fact be perceived as actual support for the political claims in the name of which the space of appearance was opened up in the first place. Rather, to be of support is to pose the question of ethics, in ways that Butler's relational ethics consciously echoes. Drawing on this idea, I will now move to demonstrate how this relational call to ethics also presents a broader understanding of support.

iii) A Broader understanding of support

As I mentioned earlier, the allyship literature hints towards various kinds of support that can be offered, but fails to develop it further. The intention of this section is to show how Butler's understanding of support, as explicated in *Notes*, can address this shortcoming within the allyship discourse. In the previous section above, I argued that support requires a critical quality to navigate embodied ambiguities and, in this section, I will show how Butler accounts for this.

Through Butler's ethical thinking, we can expand on the different modes of providing "support" while also considering the ethical relations between subjects. As such, a relational ethics of allyship would first ask – as Butler suggested in a different context – not "what ought

I to do", but "who am I in relation to others, and how do I understand this relationship?" She continues:

> What follows is the form of relationality that we might call "ethical": a certain demand or obligation impinges upon me, and the response relies on my capacity to affirm this having been acted on, formed into one who can respond to this or that call (Butler, 2009:xii).

In this way, the obligation, and the willingness to respond to it, are implicated within one another. The ability to act and to be acted on is what constitutes the ethical relationship. This kind of ethics of support therefore affirms the kind of passivity, openness and critical thinking that the allyship discourse generally values,but fails to achieve by framing it in normative terms instead of within a relational focus. Thus, placing the dynamic relation centre stage means that the concrete obligations will flow from the encounter, if the precarity of the encounter itself is acknowledged and actively protected by the parties on "both sides". One of the ways in which the precarity of the encounter and the unease of every alliance is respected, is when both parties acknowledge that they cannot fully account for themselves, yet still have an obligation to do such an accounting to each other. This means accounting for how their respective social existence and their differential precarity are implicated in each other.

Moreover, Butler's relational thinking includes the underlying (both symbolic and material) conditions for support as part of the political arena. To be of support is therefore also to take stock of underlying conditions of support. Returning to the question central to this study (of the responsibility of the ally), I think it becomes increasingly clear that supporting embodied others requires, at the very least, the ability for allies to interpret the "surplus in meaning" arising from their own involvement or embodied presence in the scene of protest. And thereby part of this task is also to "recognise the call to ethics". Based on this insight, Butler becomes helpful in assisting us to rethink support in terms of "making the conditions for political action more accessible".

Butler's discussion on the broader networks of support can therefore offer fruitful ways of considering infrastructural and environmental modes of support together with allyship. And this understanding of support is an extension of the materiality of her analysis of precarity, embodiment and exposure to harm. The way in which Butler theorised precarity, vulnerability and interdependency can be connected to allyship, as it is possible that identifying these environmental and infrastructural vulnerabilities could be an indication of the support needed.

As such, a relational ethics of support could translate into a more concrete strategy where the ability of identifying conditions of support is developed and prioritised. More tangible examples of this type of support include providing food and water to protestors, sharing important information, monitoring potential threats of violence or a commitment to rethinking the accessibility of certain public spaces. However, each protest scenario might require these forms of support in varying ways, and therefore the ethics of allyship requires a more tactful response that includes different levels of support for different stakeholders as the needs for support will also not be uniform. Support that is also tactful will therefore always be conceived within the parameters of awareness of the prior social norms that shape and distribute precarity, and with the aim to challenge, disrupt and subvert them.

To think of the broader networks of support also includes, quite literally, to remember the earth on which we cohabitate. These questions tie in with Butler's ecological critique of Arendt's political space of appearance. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, the unchosen dimension of our being on earth also supposes/implies an ethical obligation for humans as allies for the earth. Butler's work could therefore also offer promising opportunities for the allyship discourse to expand itself as a broader ecological project. As Butler (2019) mentioned in an interview: "The critique of individualism has been an important component of both feminist and Marxist thought, and it now becomes urgent as we seek to understand ourselves as living creatures bound to human and nonhuman creatures, to entire systems and networks of life." This type of relational thinking also helps us to see the dangers of reducing support to overt action, which can easily encourage the kind of "performative allyship" that is rightly criticised as self-serving. If I "offer support" by donating money towards a good cause for the sole purpose of claiming tax deductibles, it does not necessarily qualify the action as "supportive" on a deeper relational level.

Butler's relational ethics therefore also serves as a framework to consider allyship from an ecological perspective. Butler (2020) expands the ethical project by asking:

> What do we owe those with whom we inhabit the earth? And what do we owe the earth, as well, while we're at it? And why do we owe people or other living creatures that concern? Why do we owe them regard for life or a commitment to a nonviolent relationship? Our interdependency serves as the basis of our ethical obligations to one another. When we strike at one another, we strike at that very bond.

In conclusion, Butler's relational ethics is able to critically address the normative assumption within the allyship discourse that frames acts of allyship as good/bad. This dichotomous thinking, in turn, promotes principle-based ethics as a basis for support in ways that are over-simplistic and narrow. In contrast, Butler provides a richer framework by i) considering norms and discourse as entangled with ethics; ii) emphasising the significance of the "ethical call" before any individualistic "ought" questions; and iii) by providing a broader understanding of support in terms of acknowledging ambiguities, and considering infrastructural and ecological conditions as an undeniable characteristic of "support". The crux of my argument is therefore that "probing social relationality will give us some clues about what a different ethical framework [for allyship] would be" (Butler, 2020).

4.4. Action

An overarching theme within the allyship discourse is the insight that "awareness surrounding privilege is not enough" (Sawyer, 2019). Instead, it is put forth that it is only through *action* that "true allyship" transpires. The concept of "active allyship" consequently features as a prominent term to "turn privilege into change". In Broido's definition, the term "*working* to support" implies that action is required in order to be an ally, this idea is also echoed in the multiple calls for allies to "do the work" within the social discourse. In this section, I will use Butler's relational consideration of political action to argue that the allyship discourse offers an inadequate conceptualisation of action, especially within protest spaces. While the allyship literature does prove helpful in identifying various examples of actions that allies could take, there seems to be inherent assumptions regarding understandings of political action, that often neglect to acknowledge embodied ambiguities, and as such remain undisputed.

4.4.1. "Doing the work": Assumptions about political action within allyship discourse

As I briefly mentioned, contrary to "bad allyship", modes of being "true" or "real" allies are often synonymous with the notion of "active allyship". Those who promote the idea that "allyship is a verb and not a noun" therefore push for allyship to involve "consistent action, support, and solidarity with marginalized groups and anti-oppression moments and movements" (Anon., 2015). The two primary assumptions that I identify within this discourse is i) the use of words vs action as a false dichotomy, and ii) a reduction of action to deliberate strategies.

i) *Words vs Action as false dichotomy*

As I have illustrated throughout this chapter, dichotomous thinking is deeply ingrained within the allyship discourse. The ontological and ethical dependency on such thinking therefore also filters through within the realm of politics and political action. The presumed dichotomy between words and action tend to be expressed as follows: Talking about allyship (on social media or between people) is not "true allyship". Or phrased differently, claiming allyship does not constitute allyship. Instead, allyship should involve action. As such, allyship is framed not a way of *being*, rather as a conscious action.

Carlson (2019:4) notes that 80% of all allyship literature emphasise the need for "constant action" as a defining characteristic. He writes: "sources were clear: if allies don't act, then they aren't really allies, and more than that, they are doing harm" (Carlson, 2019:4). As another example from the allyship literature, Patton and Bondi (2015:489) call for "moving beyond words toward actions that disrupt oppressive structures". In this phrase it is evident that words and action are presented as divergent categories. It is therefore implied that "words" or "speaking about allyship" does not constitute action, or "true allyship". And more so, when aspiring allies fail to act, they are merely "performative allies" or "fake allies".

To counter the "lack of action" that stems from "performative allies", there is also a broader suggestion to replace the term "ally" with "accomplice", as it emphasises "doing the work" instead of merely claiming a superficial allyship "identity" through words (Schild, 2017). In contrast, an "accomplice actively works to dismantle oppressive systems. Expects hard work, no recognition, lifelong fight" (Kim, 2019). However, this only reinforces dichotomous thinking which conceives of *being* and *acting* as entirely separate from one another. While it argued that acting is a choice and identity is given, it should also not be overlooked that ally positionalities and allied action co-constitute one another. To this extent being entails acting and acting entails being. To this extent, the social discourse's insistence that allyship is a verb and not a noun as a broader slogan to advocate for active allyship radically misplaces the intricate relationship between being and acting. Indeed, allyship is both a noun and a verb in ways that are mutually constitutive.

Similarly than with the marginalised/oppressed dichotomy, the words/action dichotomy also imply that there is an either/or dynamic instead of a "both/and" one. This dichotomous thinking thus suggest that words and actions are opposing forces, where words are considered passive

in comparison to actions. These ideas refer to an interesting tension between language and action more generally. It is often said colloquially that "actions speak louder than words". Begging the question, can words not constitute action? Or can language not act and be embodied? As I mentioned, in the allyship discourse, it is put forth that "allied action" involves moving away from words of proclaimed allyship towards concrete action. Yet simultaneously, strategies such as using privilege to speak up, alongside purposeful silence or actively listening to others is also considered as valued actions in other instances.

To this extent, this notion of going *beyond* words, is adding to the idea that active allyship does not include the use of transformative language, dialogue or critical conversations. Simultaneously the physical risk that is required as a precondition for active allyship is not elaborated upon and the emphasis on the body is neglected. In other words, action or active allyship is propagated, but not conceptually defined or interrogated within the broader realm of protest, gathering, agency or political action. I therefore suggest that the allyship discourse and literature needs to rethink their account of political action with these conflicting ideas surrounding what qualifies as allied action in mind. I will also show in section 4.4.2. how Butler, especially within her ready of Arendt, offers a more comprehensive account of political action that can circumvent the problematic words/action dichotomy.

ii) Political action as an end in itself

The second assumption regarding political action within the allyship discourse follows on my first point. The focus on "action" as a positive end in itself (active allies are presumed to be good allies), also offer a narrow view of political action where agency is presumed to be a calculatingly individual affair, and this manifests in the form of deliberate action strategies. The academic discourse surrounding allyship therefore mostly focus on different "action strategies" that allies could take.

DeTurk (2011)'s article "Allies in Action" was used to name some of the characteristics of allies that are identified in the academic literature. DeTurk's consideration of allied action provides an interesting starting point to consider the emphasise on action strategies. Examples of the different types of action that allies could take include "protest, advocacy, volunteering, learning, interrupting oppression by speaking up, and donating money" (DeTurk, 2011:578). While all of these strategies might be valuable in an intrinsic sense, merely mentioning or

identifying them fails to speak to the *event* of action. To make this point clearer, I will briefly draw on a personal example.

During the time of #FeesMustFall, I recall walking with a new acquaintance that I met at a meeting organised by a group called *Volksverraaiers* (traitors of the volk)[83]. We were on our way to a live performance at a festival, when suddenly we encountered a group of black students from the #FeesMustFall movement who were mobilising a protest at the University's administration building. Having not been aware of the protest, or planned to participate, we asked a smaller group of protestors what was going on. At that stage, the group of protestors were all attempting to cover their faces. By coincidence I was wearing a special scarf that one of my mother's white Afrikaans friends gave to her. In that moment, someone needed a scarf and I had one. In that moment, there was an embodied call for me to give my mother's scarf to this stranger to enable her participation in the protest. I did not plan to do so, rather it was an embodied impulse. After receiving my scarf, the group of protestors continued to trespass the building and smash out its main window. The next day, there were reports of all the damage done to the university building. And of course, I had to explain to my mother why her precious scarf was missing.

On a more symbolic note, this encounter illustrates for me the event-like aspect of protest action. Was this perhaps a small act of allyship? I did not deliberately attend a protest, and I also did not physically partake in the deeds that can be categorised as a protest. I was not complicit or involved in any concrete sense. But still, it is often the case within more radical examples that potential allies might show up by accident. Moreover, just showing up, or physically being there, does not necessitate the existence of allyship. Thus, I argue that the type of framework which DeTurk offers (where action is qualified by the acts in themselves) supposes a sense of transparency and control in terms of action. Especially within the protest space, interventions do not take the shape of any deliberate "strategies". Or even if there was any initial strategy, the volatile and dynamic nature of protest might produce a different moment than the ones that can be planned.

Moreover, it is also needed to consider how examples of protest action within the allyship discourse could go beyond notions of agency that centre sovereign, masculine and ableist

[83] This movement emerged at Stellenbosch University to challenge the group AfriForum and other Afrikaner nationalist movements who they claimed, "do not speak on our behalf". In many ways this group was formed to reimagine Afrikaner identity and tried to debunk the perceived homogeneity between white Afrikaans people.

"action" in the public sphere. The very association with action as something deliberate or entirely individual and self-conscious stems from the strong ontological thinking present within the allyship discourse, I would maintain. Political action does not have to entail physically smashing a window or making some big speech. A more feminist understanding of action might therefore be a helpful tool to address the kind of event where merely giving a scarf to someone is a political act with excess meaning and relational implications.

Therefore, the social and academic discourse of allyship is limited to the extent that the discussion on action is underdeveloped beyond the above-mentioned suggestions of ways or strategies for acting. As such, questions pertaining to the complexities regarding these forms of suggested action emerges. For example: what is the relationship between language/verbal expression and action? How can we consider these types of actions as embodied? Who evaluates the "success" of these actions? Or what type of agency is implied by these forms of action? In the next section, I will show how Butler's provision of a more feminist account of political action can therefore address these questions.

4.4.2. Towards theorising "allies in action" with Butler

In this section I will show how Butler's account of political action, especially as theorised in *Notes* is able to offer a more adequate account of "allies in action". Firstly, I will argue that Butler is able to transcend the word/action dichotomy and the notion of action as an end in itself with her understanding of the space of appearance and the significance of bodies as integral to theorising political action (i). Secondly, I will illustrate how Butler is able to provide a vocabulary that can speak to the embodied ambiguities – that so often accompany allied action (ii). With this renewed vocabulary for allyship in mind, I will conclude my overarching argument by briefly revisiting the human shield case study as an example of how Butler's relational thinking repositions questions surrounding allyship.

i) Political action as embodied in alliance

According to Dietz (2003:419), the question that underpins the concept of political action, relates to what it means "to actualize public spaces and enact democratic politics". In other words, questions surrounding ability to appear in public are vital for considering how we act, or what it means to act. To this extent, unpacking allyship as a political act involves many different dimensions, especially on a philosophical level.

In *Notes* most of Butler's thoughts on alliances and assembly are underpinned by broader questions surrounding political action. For example, by asking how precarity is "enacted and opposed in sudden assemblies" as an opportunity to "reflect upon the embodied character of social action and expression", Butler (2015:22) clearly frames her project. As such Butler's account of action includes also the conditions for acting. However, one of the most promising ways in which I think that Butler can enrich the allyship discourse is through her focus on the embodied nature of action and alliances more generally in ways that serve to destabilise the speech/action dichotomy explicated in the previous section.

One of the major components of Butler's political thinking is her focus on the body and embodied modes of political action. In this way, Butler's political thinking can also be read as a feminist critique. Specifically, her critical position is captured by her insistence that the personal is political. And as such, our bodily needs or restrictions are always political.

These ideas are developed further in *Notes* where Butler draws strongly on Arendt to consider political action as embodied. In fact, most of the arguments that Butler puts forth towards embodied political action in *Notes* are derived from her re-reading of Arendt because for Arendt, political action takes place on the condition that the body appear (Butler, 2015:76). By simultaneously drawing on, and exposing the limits of Arendt's philosophy, Butler questions the Arendtian notion that "bodily survival is a non-political activity" (Rollman, 2015). For example, Butler does not think that "private" bodily reactions such as hunger, anger, and exhaustion are exempt from the political sphere. This is because for Butler, such bodily experiences and expressions of vulnerability are a manifestation of how subjecthood and citizenship are unequally distributed in society. What Butler alludes to is that the very act of appearing and speaking in the public realm is dependent on the fundamentally vulnerable, interdependent aspect of bodily life that cannot be restricted to the private realm. Thus, by showing the centrality of the material body to the possibility of public appearance, Butler also destabilises the very possibility of the Arendtian "pre-political". In short, Butler's novel response to Arendt indicates that "the claim of equality is not only spoken or written, but is made when bodies appear together, or, rather, when, through their actions, they bring the space of appearance into being"[84] (Butler, 2015:89). Thus political action is enabled by virtue of bodies appearing together. But this appearance as a form of political action is not separate from

the precarity experienced within the private realm (i.e. hunger or sexual abuse), instead it destabilises the very distinction between public and private. When a body is abused, that abuse and experience of abuse is political. However, when multiple bodies appear together against the abuse (which is mostly felt in the private realm), the prevalence of that abuse is made public and contested, and as such, the very bodily appearance is a political act of resistance.

According to Butler, "if we appear, it must be seen, which means that our bodies must be viewed and their vocalized sounds must be heard: the body must enter the visual and audible field" (Butler, 2015:86). It is the body which enters and thereby brings the public 'space of appearance' into being, and from which the "vocalized sounds" emanate. This leads Butler (2015:88) to consider how we understand political "action, gesture, stillness, touch, and moving together", and whether these concepts are reducible to the vocalization of thought through speech. By making this point, Butler acknowledges that the body and embodied acts are the carriers of excess meaning, where a gesture, stillness, or touch can transcend its primary meaning to refer to something else beyond itself.

Moreover, Butler's account of precarity also demonstrated that the "we" is not only produced by vocalised claims, but also in terms of "the conditions of possibility of their appearance". For this reason, politics is inseparably linked with the meaningful presence of bodies. It thus is, according to Butler, already by appearing, prior to any verbal communication, that political action transpires. Of course, the acts that follow from appearing are also political, the point is to recognise that action cannot be reduced to deliberate acts or words but is already initiated in a primary and deeply relational sense. The point is therefore not that bodies transcend or precede language, or words, but rather than our bodies are already speaking before it is "acting". Or phrased differently, to be a body is already an action, and "assertions are but one form of political enactment" (Butler, 2020:163).

For Butler (2015:76), who we are in "bodily" form, is already a way of "being for the other" to the extent that we make ourselves available through our bodies "in ways that we can neither fully anticipate [n]or control". Butler's understanding of political action is therefore premised on the idea that one appears to others in ways unknown to the self and as such establish my own body through my appearance to others. To this extent, Butler's understanding of political action is also based on a deep relationality where action is a shared event co-constituted by our relational interdependency. As she rather profoundly writes:

> No one body establishes the space of appearance, but this action, this performative exercise, happens only "between" bodies, in a space that constitutes the gap between my own body and another's. In this way, my body does not act alone when it acts politically. Indeed, the action emerges from the "between", a spatial figure for a relation that both binds and differentiates (Butler, 2015:77).

The dynamic and event-like characteristic of public assembly is thus captured within Butler's understanding of actions as something that emerges between bodies. In this way, action cannot be reduced to any deliberate strategy, because the embodied tensions or eruptions emerge within this realm of the "in-between" that can never be fully anticipated or controlled. For this reason, I think that this conceptualisation of embodied political action that emphasises what happens between bodies as the space where action is relationally co-constituted can offer in abstract terms a rather practical/concrete implication for allyship in two immediate ways. First, a linguistic/semantic change can be implemented regarding the way we speak about action, or doing the work of allyship, as a verb. My suggestion would be that both the academic literature and social discourse needs to acknowledge that in fact, allyship is both a noun and a verb in ways that are implicated in one another. And moreover, further research is needed that emphasise the significance of the body as a destabilising tool to disrupt the language/action dichotomy, as well as the conceptualisation of action as a deliberate or individuated phenomenon. I will further this point in the next section, where I suggest that Butler's vocabulary can be used to help rethink political action within the allyship discourse.

ii) Vocabulary that can speak to ambiguities of allyship

In many ways, this study can be framed as a hermeneutical problem with a relational answer. The problem being that the definition and discourse of allyship neglects to offer adequate ways of *interpreting* the "surplus in meaning" of allyship as a buzzword and political phenomenon. In short, I have argued consistently throughout this thesis that simplistic, binary, or dichotomous thinking does not suffice to describe or account for the inevitably complex, diverse and ambiguous encounters that accompany allyship.

Because the allyship discourse does not go beyond promoting action as an end in itself, it also does not provide a theoretical or practical understanding of the tensions and ambiguities that occur within encounters of political action, such as protests (beyond the contradicting principled approach explicated in section 4.3.). Contemporary examples make it clear that our

understanding of action cannot be reduced only to the physical or concrete act in itself. The act of staying silent, speaking up, forming a human shield, or advocating for someone on social media always gestures towards something beyond itself, and I argue that Butler can be helpful asset to scholars who are considering allyship, precisely because she is able to offer a theoretical vocabulary that is able to address these ambiguities.

Through Butler's vocabulary of precarity, precariousness, performativity, vulnerability, recognisability, normative violence, (un)livability, responsibility and uneasy alliance, both the significance of the actions, the relationship between the actors, and the conditions for acting are acknowledged as significant. With these terms and its theoretical expositions in mind, it might be useful to see how a Butlerian definition of allyship might help to reposition the human shield case study as an act of allyship. My alternative working definition of allyship (in Butlerian terms) is as follows:

> Allies can be positioned as less-precarious bodies within unpredictable and uneasy alliances, who repetitively seek to respond to the ethical call to minimise the precarity of others. This is achieved through performative gestures, and by mobilising their own vulnerability and precariousness in order to offer various forms of support that serve to enhance recognisability and liveability, and expand who can appear within the collective "we".

With this alternative understanding of allyship (that centres relational thinking) in mind, I believe that the assumptions inherent in the allyship discourse can be addressed/ subverted with optimistic implications on the horizon. As such, this Butlerian analysis in terms of ontology, ethics and politics within the realm of political action is but a starting point to do so. In the final concluding remarks of this study, I will show how this renewed definition of allyship can provide an alternative reading of the human shield case study where the "surplus in meaning" can be acknowledged, uncovered and embraced.

4.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have set out to provide a relational analysis of allyship. By drawing on Butler's relational thinking – as was explained throughout this thesis – I was able to show how such thinking can provide a richer alternative to address the common assumptions within the allyship discourse; namely its reliance on sovereign subjectivity, principle-based ethics, and a dichotomous framework of action as an end in itself.

After setting the scene for this chapter, I first turned towards the theme of "privilege". I argued that the allyship discourse is reliant on singular identity models, and that it often conflates identity for positionality, both of which reinforce a strong ontology of the subject. In contrast, I argued that Butler's account of subjectivity evades this thinking based on her emphasis on what I call "precarious positionalities". Her understanding of precarity and performativity as intersectional categories, together with the dynamic relationship between precarity and precariousness both emphasise a relational mode of being that can frame the textured realities of allyship.

With the above in mind, I then examined the theme of "support" as presented within the allyship discourse. Drawing on the overwhelming amount of texts that offer guidelines on "how to be a good ally", I argued that the good/bad ally dichotomy ought to be demystified as it assumes a principled-based approach which neglects to consider the ambiguities of allyship. Moreover, I maintained that the allyship discourse offers a very narrow understanding of support, when in fact the various kinds of support need more theoretical attention. Based on these ideas, I suggested that Butler's proclivity towards acknowledging norms within normative frameworks; emphasising the ethical call as having precedence over principles; and offering a broader understanding of support will prove to be fruitful within the allyship discourse.

Lastly, I turned to the theme of "action". By demonstrating how the allyship discourse puts forth a false dichotomy between words and action and prioritises action as a deliberate strategy or end in itself, I argued that it is needed to incorporate broader understandings of political action that can challenge these views. I suggest that Butler is able to offer some insight into theorising "allies in action" based on her understanding of political action as embodied and her broader relational vocabulary that can speak to the ambiguities and ambivalence of allied action within broader alliances.

It can thus be concluded that Butler does indeed offer a fruitful framework to simultaneously take a critical stand against the allyship discourse, and to offer an alternative account of allyship that is able to re-imagine "not just what it means to ally with one another, but what it means to live with one another" (Butler, 2015:70). In what follows, I will offer some concluding remarks to show how Butler's relational thinking enabled me to consider a more nuanced interpretation of the "surplus in meaning" embedded in examples of allyship.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

In Chapter One, I illustrated with the human shield case study that there were ontological, ethical and political ambiguities present within the intervention of perceived allyship and the public's response to it that followed. Moreover, I found that the prevailing social and academic discourse surrounding allyship failed to address these ambiguities. In other words, it was clear that there was an excess of meaning layered within this political act of (perceived) allyship, but there lacked a theoretical framework (for me) to make sense of it. Having pre-empted that a relational approach might bridge this problem, I now wish to briefly return to this human shield case study as an example of how Butler's relational thinking could offer a new vocabulary to address its complexities based on my revised definition of allyship.

Perhaps the most salient point is that Butler's relational thinking does consider ethics, ontology and politics as interrelated, and therefore on a very basic level, this acknowledges the fact that these ambiguities are present and needed to uncover/ engage with. Moreover, what makes Butler's relational thinking as a framework for allyship so compelling, is the fact that it can – by underscoring what happens in-between – speak to the *event* of allyship as the locus of complexity in ways that the allyship discourse simply fails to acknowledge. Whereas the allyship literature and social discourse might identify acts of allyship based on its definition or evaluate allyship interventions based on its success/ failure or deliberate action strategies, Butler's relational thinking invites us to ask a different set of questions.

Butler's understanding of the relational subject, might prompt one to ask: What kind of performative gesture underlies the making of the human shield? Which discursive constructions of power are at play in such an act? In what way are the various members of the alliances differentially precarious? Or what does this act say about our socially constituted dependency on each other? And what kind of political demands made by these embodied gestures are at stake here?

On a symbolic level, the fact that the human shield required for various unknown others to hold hands with each other in uniform to form one cohesive body prompts us to ask: how is this human shield blurring the lines between individual and social action? How are the bodies in alliance mutually implicated? How can we understand the relationship between the allies and the in-group alliance as an uneasy relationship? Or perhaps, in which ways is this an unpredictable alliance? And who is considered as part of the collective "we" in this encounter?

Moreover, a relational framework would not emphasise the act (forming a human shield to combat the precarity of black bodies against the police) as either good/bad, but rather it may well ask: how were the conditions for acting not met? Or how is the "surplus in meaning" of the human shield bound up with the ways in which precarity undermines "conditions for acting"?

With regards to the public response that emphasised the white allies as the protectors or saviours, a relational lens might ask instead: Whose bodies are considered grieveable in this context? If the white bodies were praised, were the black bodies mourned and recognised with equal consideration? What kinds of normative violence was at play here? Did the allies minimise, or reinforce precarity? How was vulnerability mobilised in concert? What kind of ethical relationship was formed within this alliance? Or in which ways could proximity mediate the ethical response of both the allies and those in need of support? What kind of infrastructural or environmental support was needed as a condition for acting together?

Having traversed Butler's relational thinking, it is apparent that none of these questions posed towards the human shield case study will involve a simple or seamless answer. In fact, most of them will probably prompt even more critical questions. Similarly than Butler's approach to politics, this thesis also does not attempt to provide a clear "how to" in relation to allyship. For this reason, it is beyond its scope the flesh out the allyship case study in relational terms. Instead, I too advocate for an internal erosion that can offer subtle ways of subverting and rethinking the dominant discourse. As such, I am suggesting that a deeply relational understanding of allyship initiates the kinds of questions which can account for the complexities, ambiguities and ambivalence that lie *between* buzzwords and bodies.

The initial question posed in this thesis was: In what way may Judith Butler's relational thinking contribute to a more nuanced and clearer understanding of the complex ambiguities or "surplus in meaning" accompanying the discourse of allyship? As a final thought, I think it is apparent that Butler's relational thinking can speak to the "surplus in meaning" between acts of allyship not by attempting to resolve or diminish it, but rather by providing a textured theoretical vocabulary that can reframe the kinds of questions we ask about allyship in the first place.

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ADDENDUM:

Figure 2: *The Human Shield at UCT.* 20 October, 2015. (Wesi, 2015). [https://citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/827670/uct-protesters-call-for-white-human-shield/]